

THE MAN BRANDERS



FRANK · C · ROBERTSON

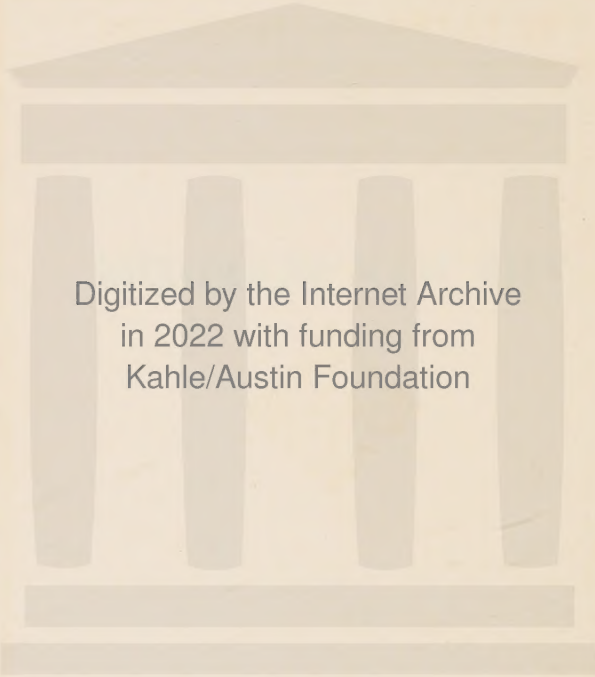
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THE MAN BRANDERS



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THE MAN BRANDERS

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

AUTHOR of

"The Foreman of the Forty-Bar," etc.



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CHAPTER I

THE BLUFFER

JEFF SINGLETON alighted from the train at Salina, and glanced around inquiringly. He had been told that it was sixty miles to the Cross Anchor ranch, and that there would be an auto at the depot to meet him. There were several cars parked about the platform, but he saw no one who looked as though he might be a driver from the ranch. Indeed, though several passengers got off the train, there was only one person on the platform who appeared to be looking for anyone. And that person was a girl.

Jeff saw the girl's eyes pass over him indifferently, and then she walked timidly up to a long and lanky individual who had got off the train directly behind Jeff. This man wore a green checked shirt, blue overalls, a two-gallon Stetson, and cowboy boots. His face was the color of brown wrapping paper. A high nose, oddly twisted mouth, and quizzical blue eyes gave him a decided appearance of humorous eccentricity.

"I'm from the Cross Anchor," Jeff heard the girl say. "Are you the man I was to meet?"

"Why, I reckon so," drawled the cow-puncher. "They generally meets me with brass bands an' a golden key to the city, but a purty girl like you favors me a whole lot more."

"That's my car right over there," the girl indicated. "I'll be ready to travel just as soon as you are."

The tall puncher hesitated a moment, and then a grin came over his twisted mouth. "That's my outfit that them baggage smashers is dumpin' off up there. Soon's I check it out I'll be ready fer the ride."

He turned away and the girl gave his retreating back rather a disapproving frown. Then she turned and walked over to her car, and got into the driver's seat. Jeff followed slowly, and approached the car from the other side. The girl's eyebrows lifted slightly as he bowed to her, but she waited coolly for him to speak.

"Did I understand that you are from the Cross Anchor ranch?"

"You may have overheard me say that," she admitted.

"It happens that I am bound for that ranch myself. In fact I was told that I would be met here.

My name is Singleton, and I am the new manager of the ranch."

The girl gave a sharp gasp of surprise. "Why—why I was to meet you, but that other man in the green shirt said——"

"Did he say he was the new manager?"

"No-o, but he implied——"

"I'll have to admit that he looks more like a rancher than I do," Jeff grinned.

"I'm sorry for my mistake," the girl said with a blush.

"A perfectly natural one," Jeff assured her. "Now I'll get my suitcase. If our friend yonder still wishes to pose as the manager, just let him."

The girl's quick smile let him know that she saw the humor of the situation. And yet Mattie Childs was somewhat puzzled as she watched him stroll back toward the depot. She had passed him over the first time as the possible manager because of his youth, as well as the fact that he seemed entirely too well dressed to be going to a ranch. He could not be, she thought, much more than twenty-five—a rather immature age to be managing an outfit the size of the Cross Anchor. It was true that the other fellow had not seemed quite the right caliber, but he was the only one to get off the train who looked like an out-door man.

The man in the green shirt was coming back lugging a gunny sack—which plainly contained a saddle and accoutrements—in one hand, and a canvas warbag in the other.

“Just throw your things in the back, and get in here with me,” Mattie invited.

The puncher obeyed with alacrity and gave a genial grin as he settled himself beside the girl.

“We have been expecting the company to send you down for a long time,” Mattie offered.

“Yuh know how companies is—allus slow about gittin’ around to things,” he pointed out.

“Aren’t they?” the girl agreed. “But I’m awfully glad you’ve arrived. It’s too much for my father, all this stealing and everything. He’ll be glad to turn things over to you.”

She saw the puncher’s eyes widen, and she expected him to avow that there had been a mistake made, but he rallied for another skirmish. “How much of a place is this Cross Arrow anyway?” he asked.

“Cross Anchor,” she corrected. “Oh, we run about twelve thousand head of cattle, and there are between twenty and thirty thousand acres of land owned and leased, besides, of course, the open range we control.”

“Quite a sizable outfit all right,” he admitted.

"But I can see that you are a man who is used to doing big things," the girl said seriously.

"Yeah, I work on a big scale," the man admitted modestly.

"I suppose you know that the last few managers the company sent out were frightened away?"

"Yuh don't say?"

"But I can see that you are not the kind of man to be scared away easily," Mattie said in what seemed quick admiration.

"I'm shore hard to scare," he assured her. "Do we start right away?"

"In just a minute. There's another man riding out with us. He's coming there with his suitcase."

"Who is he?" For the first time the puncher showed signs of alarm.

"Just a city man out to spend a vacation," the girl said carelessly.

Thus reassured the puncher settled himself more firmly in his place and eyed the supposed tenderfoot with cool disfavor. "Just dump yore truck there in the back an' crawl in with it," he directed grandly.

Jeff followed instructions and the girl started the engine. Once out of town the road entered a canyon and followed a long, though not excessively steep grade for a good many miles.

"What's yore job on this ranch?" the puncher asked.

"Well, I have no settled job. My father, Ezra Childs, is the foreman. Has been so for many years. I have been practically raised on the ranch, so I can do almost anything that needs to be done. I—I hope you are not thinking of discharging us, Mr. Singleton?"

The puncher gave another start, and half turning in his seat he eyed Jeff furtively. Jeff's expression, however, was perfectly blank.

"Fire you? I should say not! How'd yuh know my name was Singleton?"

"Why, the letter from the company said that was your name."

"Oh, shore."

Jeff leaned ahead and touched the puncher on the shoulder. "I hope you will not object to my presence on the ranch."

"Tenderfeet are all right in their place if they don't git in the way of the men," was the answer.

Both Jeff and the girl continued to pile questions upon the man as to his future line of conduct. And "Bilious" Burket was not in the least modest in telling what he intended to do, basing his answers on the scant information he was able to glean from the girl.

Two things had conspired to get him into this scrape; one an overpowering love for a practical joke, and the other because he wanted to get out to the cow country and a possible job with the utmost haste and the least expense. He had almost backed out when he heard that he was supposed to be manager of such a big outfit, but had decided to stick to his guns. It had got even hotter for him when the girl addressed him by another man's name, but he still stuck to his guns. The worst they could do was run him off the ranch when they learned of the deception.

As for Jeff he was getting a keen enjoyment out of the whole affair. He had naturally suspected the puncher of evil motives in passing himself off for another, but he was quickly convinced that the fellow was only using a colossal nerve to get a free ride. In a way the man was worthy of admiration. And Jeff was also getting much pleasure out of watching the girl's delicate profile as she drove the car. She was pretty, and the way she kept up her end with the puncher showed that she was intelligent.

The only thing that worried him greatly was a remark made a few days earlier by Homer Graves, the secretary of the Hood Land & Livestock Company. "You had better fire old man Childs when

you get down there. He was a foreman for Henry Clarke before we foreclosed on the property, and he has stuck ever since; but he seems to be considerable of a fossil. The managers we have sent down there have all been run out, but Childs isn't molested, which would indicate that he hasn't much force or he would be run out, too."

Though it had seemed but part of the joke, when the girl requested the puncher in the green shirt not to discharge her father, Jeff sensed that she had said it for his benefit—and that there had been a note of genuine anxiety in her tone when she asked it.

"Well, I'm manager, and I'll suit myself," Jeff thought.

He had insisted, indeed, that he be given a free hand. It was a big assignment for one of his years, and he realized that he had landed the job mostly through the reputation of old Jack Singleton, his father. He had been an old-time ranch and cattle foreman who long before built up a reputation for fearlessness and square dealing. Old Jack had never possessed the business head to acquire a fortune for himself, but he had made thousands of dollars for various employers before his death. He had saved enough to educate his son, but Jeff had also clung to the ranch life; and following his graduation from

a business college after high school, he had sought employment from the people for whom his father had worked.

He had made good on the small ranch he had been called to manage, and then he had been asked to take over the Cross Anchor. The property had been losing money rapidly, and the previous managers had all been glad to leave. The officers of the company had decided that the son of old Jack Singleton, if he inherited any of his father's ability, might be able to put it back on a paying basis.

Jeff realized that it would be a marvelous opportunity if he succeeded—and practical ruination of his career if he failed.

This brought him back to the realization that he could not put his own chances in jeopardy by tolerating a fossilized foreman. On the other hand it was going to be very hard to hurt this capable, deft-handed girl.

The car was at last out of the canyon, and the road stretched away over a high plateau that was broken only occasionally by low, rolling hills and ridges. Here and there was an occasional ranch, but for the most part it was grass land. Beyond the plateaus were higher hills, many of them covered with groves of small timber. At the foot of these hills, where they joined the lower end of the

plateau, was the ranch, the girl informed them.

Once, while the car was crossing an unusually rough stretch, Jeff picked up the rider's warbag and gently tossed it out in the road. When the car had gone perhaps a hundred yards he called, "Say, I believe something of yours has bounced out, Mr. Singleton."

Bilious glanced around and discovered his loss, and the girl brought the car to a stop.

"Now how the hell—I piled that sack right in the bottom," Bilious muttered. He stared in sudden doubt.

"But I'm quite sure that is it back there," Jeff offered innocently, but making no move to retrieve the other man's property. Bilious reluctantly climbed out, and his fears that it might be only a ruse to leave him behind seemed to him well grounded. Still, he was convinced that the real Singleton must be back at least as far as Salina. Jeff, he was sure, was just what he pretended to be—a tenderfoot.

"What's the idea? Shall we leave him?" Mattie asked when Bilious was out of hearing.

"No. I just wanted a chance to tell you to go through with this to the limit—just as long as Green-Shirt wants to play."

"But that is ridiculous."

"Introduce him to your father and all the rest as Singleton. If he weakens of course the joke will be explained. If he don't, and I really believe he'll go through with it for a while, just let him go till I give the word."

"But my father."

"I'll explain to your father, and present my own credentials later."

"But what shall I call you? You'll have to be explained some way," Mattie demanded.

"Well, introduce me as Mr. Jackling, a tender-foot looking for a new thrill; that will explain my presence," Jeff said.

Bilious came stalking back with his warbag, and stowed it carefully in the tonneau. "I wanta be sure that thing don't walk out again," he said pointedly.

It was nearly quitting time when they reached the Cross Anchor ranch. Jeff gazed curiously out on the hundreds of acres of hay land, over which the water was just beginning to flow with the opening of the irrigation season. There was also a tract of grain land above the canal zone with a band of freshly-plowed soil around it, and men and tired horses were already coming to the barns.

The buildings were about what he expected; long, low, sturdily built cabins and stables. There

were plenty of corrals and machine sheds, and he noticed that things appeared to be well kept. He had expected to find things in bad disorder.

But the size of this proposition he had come to manage began to appall him. For the first time he began to experience self doubts. After all he was decidedly young to have a job of that size thrust upon him. He looked at the brassy, green-shirted puncher in the front seat, and found himself wishing that that individual was really what he was pretending to be.

Then he saw a finely built man, whose iron gray hair and beard branded him as somewhere between fifty and sixty, approaching the car. His step was firm and his eyes keen. "Well, Mattie, did you git him?" he asked the girl.

"Yes, Dad, this is—is Mr. Singleton," Mattie said, gravely indicating Bilious. Only a slight quivering of her lips betrayed her insincerity, but her father and Bilious were too busy sizing each other up to notice her. Ezra Childs was naturally anxious to see what kind of a man his new superior was, and Bilious Burket was wondering if it was safe to keep up the deceit until he had obtained supper, bed and breakfast.

"Glad to have yuh come. Mr. Singleton," Childs said cordially. "Yuh're not quite the type of man I

expected the company to send, but I'm better pleased. You look like a real stockman." There was subtle flattery there.

"Yep, I know stock from hoof to horn," Bilious confessed cheerfully as he unlimbered himself from the car and shook hands with the foreman.

"Childs is my name, as yuh perhaps know." said the foreman.

"Mine is B—oh, just call me Bilious. Everybody does."

Childs lifted his eyebrows in surprise, but nodded his acquiescence. "The other managers have all had a room in my house. I'll take you up there now if yuh wish."

"Fine," said Bilious, and picked up his warbag.

Childs had noticed Jeff at last and looked at Mattie inquiringly. "This is Mr. Jackling, Dad. He's out to see how we do things in the West."

Childs' greeting was none too cordial. "Yuh're welcome to stay here tonight, but we ain't runnin' a dude ranch."

Jeff helped Mattie put away the car, and the fact that they were conspirators drew them together.

CHAPTER II

A HINT OF DISCORD

JEFF was told that he would have to sleep in the bunkhouse, but he was invited to have supper with the foreman's family. He found that there was a man cook for the crew, but Mrs. Childs, a buxom housewife of middle-age, did the cooking for her family and the manager. Besides Mattie there was a son, Ray, a boy of fifteen.

When he came into the dining-room Jeff glanced eagerly at Bilious, but the puncher was making himself entirely at home; and Jeff guessed that he was secretly enjoying the joke on his host. Jeff was seated opposite Mattie; and whenever opportunity offered they grinned at each other covertly. The others were inclined to ignore Jeff, their interest naturally being held by the other man's position of authority. Ray, indeed, did intimate that the boys in the bunkhouse would give the dude considerable attention later on, but his mother warned him to be quiet.

Ezra Childs continued a conversation he had evidently been having with Bilious. "As I told yuh

there has been heavy losses. We run short of hay a year ago last winter, an' a lot o' weak stuff died in the spring. Then there was a lot of poison last summer, an' undoubtedly there was some stock rustled. There's bound to be with an outfit of this size."

"Oh, shore," Bilious admitted wisely.

"But this idee the company has that the outfit is bein' gutted by rustlers is all bunk. That's what Graves told you, ain't it?" Childs demanded.

"Somethin' like that," Bilious confessed gravely.

"There's nothin' to it. I have to put in most of my time on the ranch, but I've had a good bunch of boys ridin', an' no gang of rustlers could put anything over on them."

"I bet they couldn't," Bilious said, and earned a darkly suspicious glance from his host. "I mean it wouldn't be possible with an outfit on its toes," Bilious amended hastily.

"Somehow, the other managers that have been sent down here have got the idee that we're losin' stock to the Pick and Ring outfit, up there in Horse Valley," Childs went on. "I've knowed old Tub Pickering fer years an' I wouldn't put it past him to steal cattle if he could. But these fellers have never went at it right, an' the result is old Tub an' his hardboiled gang have run 'em out."

"Say, Dad," young Ray Childs spoke up, "I met Gus Pickering on the range today, an' he asked me when a new manager was due to show up."

"What'd yuh tell him?" his father demanded.

"Told him the feller would be in today."

"Your chances of success here'll depend on how yuh handle the Pickerings," Childs said to Bilious. "What else did Gus say?" he asked the boy.

"He said he'd likely be over to call on Matt tonight," the boy grinned.

For some reason Jeff felt a sudden antipathy to the tribe of Pickering, and a particular distaste to the one called Gus. For some reason the idea of anyone coming to see Mattie Childs aroused his resentment. And he had been warned by Homer Graves to beware of the Pickering outfit.

The meal was not yet over when there came a heavy knock at the door, and in response to Childs' loud, "Come in," two men entered.

One was a man of about Childs' age, but he towered far above the Cross Anchor foreman in size. He must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds, Jeff thought, but he was fully six feet in height. In spite of his nickname and his somewhat rotund build, Jeff was sure there was tremendous power in the man's frame.

The son, for he was obviously that, was nearly

two inches taller than his father, and perhaps thirty pounds lighter—a splendid specimen of manhood so far as physique was concerned. Gus Pickering was handsome, too, except for his small eyes and a thin-lipped, cruel mouth.

“Gus here tells me yuh got a new manager,” Tub Pickering boomed when the social amenities were over.

“Yes, this is the man, Tub—Mr. Singleton. They’ve sent down a real cattleman this time, Tub,” Childs said with obvious nervousness.

Bilious got up and shook hands limply. Jeff, watching narrowly, saw tears start to the puncher’s eyes when Gus Pickering wrung his hand.

“Well, I reckon you an’ me will git along, stranger, so long as yuh stay on yore own side the fence; but I ain’t goin’ to stand fer no man snoopin’ around castin’ aspersions on my reputation like them fore-runners o’ your’n did,” Pickering senior declared heavily, and with a glance at Bilious that was meant to be intimidating.

Much to Jeff’s astonishment Bilious kicked his chair back and glared at the huge cattleman. “An’ don’t yuh birds git no idee that yuh kin scare me,” he rasped. “Me, I goes where I please, an’ I does what I please. Git me?”

The tall, homely puncher was rather a sinister

looking figure despite the fact that he knew he was perfectly safe, since he would be on his way in the morning. Jeff, watching the reaction of the Pickerings closely, was amazed to see that they were worried, and taken aback by this unexpected defiance.

Gus Pickering whirled and seized his father's arm. "Now, Dad, no rough stuff here, remember. Hold your temper while you're in the house at least," he urged placatingly.

But Jeff had noticed that the elder Pickering had no thought of making a hostile demonstration until his quicker thinking son had taken that way to save their face. Then Tub began to struggle, but Jeff knew there was no danger of his getting his gun.

"All right, I'll be good, but he don't want to ever talk to me like that again," Tub panted heavily.

Just a pair of bluffers, Jeff thought to himself. He was deeply indebted to the nervy Bilious for more than he had anticipated.

"You birds'll do to watch," Bilious said as he resumed his seat.

"Mr. Singleton has, of course, got his impressions from the home office," Ezra Childs said quickly. "He'll soon understand that we're losin' cattle from perfectly natural causes."

"We're losin' 'em, too," Gus said testily.

Bilious lay back in his chair and grinned at the younger Pickering until that worthy's face flamed.

"I come over here to see Mattie," Gus said angrily. He stepped over beside the girl, and whispered something to her which caused her to get up and lead the way into another room, with the big young ranchman at her heels.

"Look here," Tub Pickering said suddenly, "now I'm over here I want an understandin' with this new man. Either we git together right here now, the three of us, or it'll have to be war. I'm not the kind to beat around the bush about a thing."

Again Jeff looked at Bilious. He was expecting to see the puncher admit the hoax at any moment, but so long as Bilious was inclined to play the part, Jeff was inclined to let him. He knew he could not expect to make terms with Pickering unless he was inclined to accept the man's dictation, which he was not; so it was just as well to let things slide.

"I ain't givin' my hand away none whatever," Bilious declared loftily.

"Just the same you git rid of this dude, Ezra, an' we'll hold a conference," Pickering ordered.

Childs turned toward Jeff with an exasperated look. From the first he had clearly considered him a nuisance.

"I'll go down to the bunkhouse," Jeff said quickly.

"Yeah, make yoreself at home there," Childs said gruffly.

Jeff walked down to the bunkhouse and entered with the humility becoming a tenderfoot. There were perhaps twenty men in the bunkhouse passing the time according to their whims. At a glance Jeff placed the most of them as ranch hands. Some were obviously teamsters, though they affected boots and high hats. Having lived most of his life on various cattle ranches, Jeff sized them up correctly. Frequently these men were called on as extra riders, and they aspired to be known as such, yet they were by no means real punchers. But they were also the kind likely to make life unbearable to a tenderfoot.

There were, however, three men who sat apart over a solo game who were dyed-in-the-wool cow-punchers. The youngest of them was older than Jeff, and when he entered they gave him only a cursory glance and returned to their interminable game, broken only occasionally by one of them saying, "I frog," or "I solo," or "heart solo."

"Lookin' for somebody, stranger?" a voice asked.

"No. The folks at the house told me to bunk here," Jeff said simply.

"Yeah, old Ez has been scared o' havin' dudes around here ever since the last one got his foot

caught in a lumber stretcher an' tried to sue Ez for damages," contributed a would-be humorist.

"How queer! Do they actually have implements to stretch lumber?" Jeff asked innocently.

"Shore. Every carpenter has 'em. How else could they make all the pieces fit?" demanded the funny one, whose name was Lem Tooke.

"Well, I guess that's right," Jeff said with astonishment. "Tell me all about 'em."

Whenever the engine of Lem's imagination became stalled the others contributed a word until the fellow got under way again. Soon, just as Jeff had surmised, they were telling him whoppers about the range, stories of wholesale robberies, and of cow-punchers who shot down innocent strangers to see them kick. Jeff listened, goggle-eyed, and Lem spread himself more and more.

"The worst of 'em all, though, is this Pick and Ring outfit whose range touches ours. They steal cattle by the hundreds an' nobody dares oppose 'em. Why, the boys from this ranch wouldn't think o' ridin' on their range, an' as for ridin' after night, well, I'm as brave as any man, but I'm stickin' to the home ranch after dark," Lem declared.

The oldest one of the solo players suddenly looked up from his game. "Yarn all yuh want to,

Tooke, but leave the Pick and Ring out of it," he said coldly.

Tooke's face flushed uncomfortably. "All right, Haines," he said sulkily. Then lowering his voice he said to Jeff, "Them three are reg'lar riders an' they don't like to have people know how scairt they are o' the Pickerings."

"What's that?" The man called Haines got up and came over to where they were sitting. Evidently Lem Tooke had spoken louder than he thought, and he turned pale as Haines stood over him.

"Repeat that!" Haines ordered.

"I—I was just kiddin' the stranger."

"If I ain't mistaken yuh was tellin' him that us riders are cowards, or words to that effect."

"Just kiddin'," Tooke said, dry-lipped.

Haines suddenly caught Tooke's wrist and gave it a vicious twist, which large and powerful as Tooke was, took him off his chair and down on one knee.

"Yuh'll kid just one time too many one o' these days," Haines rasped. "This tenderfoot is liable to see a little gore shed right here."

Jeff noticed that Haines' two companions had placed themselves so that they dominated the room, and both carried guns. Of a sudden Jeff realized that though he might let Bilious play at being man-

ager it was not going to help his prestige any if these men thought he was playing the spy.

"Look here, this has gone far enough," he said crisply. He suddenly brought up his arm in such a way that his forearm struck under Haines' wrist and broke his hold on Tooke. The move was entirely unlooked for by both men. Haines glared at him angrily, but he had to rub his numbed wrist. Jeff returned the look unflinchingly.

"By Gawd, yuh—" Haines began.

"Just a minute. It wasn't my intention to deceive you boys, but when another undertook to pass himself off for me I let him do it for a while as a joke. But I'll tell you men now that I'm Jeff Singleton, the new manager of the Cross Anchor, and the man in the house is a good joker."

"An' what's that got to do with this affair here?" Haines demanded.

"Simply this—I'll not have any fighting going on here. If there's two men on this outfit who can't get along one or both of 'em will have to leave."

Haines suddenly turned away and walked back to the card table where he was joined by his two friends. Lem Tooke seemed to be completely dumb-founded.

"Our friend in the house don't know that the real manager is here yet. I'll take it kindly if you'll

treat him like he was the real thing,' Jeff said pleasantly.

Most of the men began to grin and the ice was broken. But the three punchers at the table obviously had failed to see the joke.

It was plain to Jeff that there would have to be a housecleaning of some kind at the Cross Anchor before peace and harmony reigned. But he was confident he could accomplish it. He had to. He was young and ambitious, with a reputation to make, but above all there was a reputation to maintain, one which his father had bequeathed to him, that of never falling down on a job.

CHAPTER III

BILIOUS GIVES ORDERS

JEFF was up early the next morning because he was anxious to explain matters to Ezra Childs before any of the men could do it. But he had no sooner stepped outside the bunk-house than he saw Childs coming toward him from the corral, and the scowl on the foreman's face indicated clearly enough that he was wise to the deception that had been practiced.

"Singleton, I call this a damn' shabby trick," he said angrily.

"It was unpremeditated, Mr. Childs, and that fellow's nerve was so good that I couldn't bear to spoil a good joke. I'm sorry," Jeff apologized.

"Tub Pickering won't take it as any joke," Childs snorted. "My Gawd, I have trouble enough with him as it is!"

"You won't have to assume so much responsibility now," Jeff said a bit curtly.

Childs gave a start. Evidently he had not considered that he was supplanted in authority. It was hard, also, for Jeff to comprehend it. The ranch was Childs' home; he was boss over the men

and had been so for years. He had acted the part of host, and Jeff had accepted his hospitality as a guest. It was a hard jolt for the old man.

Jeff recalled Graves' advice that he might have to fire Childs, who, he declared, was a fossil. Fire him he might have to do, but he knew that the foreman was by no means a fossil.

"That's right—yo're runnin' the ranch," Childs admitted sullenly.

"Yes; but I want you to keep right on handling things the way you have been. If I see any changes necessary I'll let you know. I told the boys here last night who I was and asked them to keep still about it for the present. The only man I don't want to know it yet is this fellow Bilious."

"'Bilious' is right," Childs snorted. "Of course if it's your orders it'll have to stand, but it's a purty childish prank."

The foreman turned on his heel and retraced his way to the corrals. Jeff suddenly wondered if the whole thing had not been a ridiculous prank which he should have nipped promptly in the bud. Being only twenty-seven years old he realized that a joke might appeal to him too strongly.

Following Childs to the corrals Jeff saw him talking earnestly with Ed Haines, the big puncher he had almost had trouble with the night before. At

his approach Haines walked away quite rapidly.

"Haines been with you quite a while?" Jeff asked.

"Two years; but I've known him longer'n that,"

Childs said curtly.

"Good man?"

"I don't aim to keep any other kind."

"The way he jumped onto a fellow in the bunk-house last night made me think he might be hard to get along with."

"Ed's all right, but he don't stand any foolishness. I hired him an' Gilly Moore an' Montasano Steed mostly because they are quick on the trigger, an' their job has been to watch out for rustlers," Childs said.

"By all reports they haven't succeeded very well," Jeff said curtly.

"No? I was led into explainin' to that fake manager last night how we come to lose so many cattle, an' I thought yuh was listenin'," Childs said sarcastically.

"I was. Just the same the reports in the home office indicate a shortage of fifteen hundred head in little more than a year. You don't mean to tell me that many *died* on the range?"

They were down to business now. The eyes of both men were hard and appraising.

"I said there had been some rustlin'—not much.

Poison on the range got most of 'em, an' if yuh've ever had much experience with cattle yuh ort to know how they die from undernourishment after a hard winter." The last remark was almost a sneer, and plainly expressed the speaker's opinion that his new manager knew little about cattle.

"I know all about that," Jeff said coldly. "I also took the trouble to get all the figures available. I didn't find a report of many hides sold. If the cattle died that way of course you took the hides. Have you still got them?"

The foreman winced under that one. "On a range like this yuh can't find the dead critters fer weeks mebbe, an' then the boys won't skin 'em," he declared.

"I see," Jeff drawled. He knew that cattle dying of weakness or poison were likely to all die in a short space of time. If the riders were on the job at least a fair percentage of the hides would be retrieved. Still, there was nothing in the fact upon which to base a criminal accusation. He knew well enough that cowpunchers would sluff a skinning job whenever possible, and with managers coming and going so that things were generally upset, Ezra Childs could not be blamed too harshly.

But there was little doubt in Jeff's mind that most of the cattle had been stolen. The disturbing question then was why Childs should attempt to deny it. There was, however, a perfectly logical answer to that. An admission that the outfit was being gutted might be considered an admission of his inefficiency; something no old-timer like Childs could be expected to let go unchallenged. Jeff chose to believe that. And Childs could not be blamed if the cattle had been stolen. The blame rested upon the previous managers who had failed to make good.

Three years before, the Hood Land & Livestock Company had foreclosed on Henry Clarke, the owner of the Cross Anchor. The continual losses indicated that the outfit was at the mercy of organized crooks. During that time five different managers had been sent down by the company. Each and every one had given up his job suddenly. Not one of them had ever told the exact reason for his resignation, but their shaken nerves showed conclusively that they all had been badly scared. They had intimated that the Pick and Ring outfit might be responsible, but all averred that they had been able to get no proof. This was the situation which young Jeff Singleton found himself called upon to handle.

"Can you tell me what happened to my predecessors?" Jeff inquired.

"Main trouble with 'em was they didn't know their business," Childs said shortly.

Just then they saw Bilious striding across toward them. "Hello, Buddy, have the boys got yuh onto any brones yet?" he inquired genially.

"Not yet, but they promised to have a good, gentle horse for me this morning," Jeff said hopefully.

"Cowboys is always thoughtful thataway," Bilious declared. "But you make yourself right at home here anyway."

"Thanks," Jeff drawled.

"Right after breakfast I want yuh to line all yore men up at the gate; I wanna talk to 'em," Bilious said to Childs.

The foreman choked, and looked appealingly at Jeff, who nodded his head.

"All right," Childs snapped angrily. The horseplay was getting on his nerves.

Jeff could only wonder what this surprising imposter had on his mind.

The breakfast call was sounded, and the three men went to the house together. Mattie was setting the food on the table. In her clean, freshly ironed house dress she made an admirable picture.

And her clear, fresh complexion needed no cosmetics; she had all the coloring she needed.

Jeff was young enough to appreciate her good looks and her well-groomed appearance, and he noticed that she could handle dishes as gracefully as she could handle the wheel of an automobile. He found himself keenly resenting the fact that she had "set up" with Gus Pickering.

This resentment promptly bred an unpleasant speculation in Jeff's mind. If Mattie was keeping company with Gus Pickering, as last night's affair indicated, then it must be that the Childs family was on good terms with the Pickerings. Was it possible, he wondered, that the ranch foreman could be standing in with the rustlers?

If it should turn out that way he would be obliged to discharge Childs, and he realized of a sudden that he would very much hate to do that thing. Childs himself had been none too cordial, and, though there had been a reasonable excuse for it, Jeff was honest enough to admit to himself that it was mostly because he would hate to send Mattie away from the ranch. Yet it seemed she was Gus Pickering's sweetheart. It was a complicated situation. Jeff was not one to intrude where he was not wanted, but he began to feel now that, whether or no, young Pickering was going to have a rival.

The girl greeted Jeff pleasantly, and at the first opportunity she whispered to him, "I told dad last night who you were. It wasn't right to deceive him."

"Apparently that's what he thinks," Jeff grinned, "but we may all have some fun out of Bilious yet. He's going to preach to the men right after breakfast."

Bilious gave no inkling of his intentions during the meal, but when it was over he got up and stalked out to the gate in front of the house where a grinning group of ranch hands awaited him. Jeff and the Childs family followed him out.

"Gents," began Bilious, "there's nothin' like a boss an' his men gittin' started in right. Everybody startin' in with a spirit o' good will an' that sort o' thing, if yuh know what I mean."

"Hear! Hear!" roared a chorus of joyous cowhands.

"So to git everybody into a good humor while I look around an' see what needs doin' I'm goin' to order a week's vacation fer you boys—on full pay. Go out to Salina an' celebrate, an' then come back ready to tear in."

The men gave a whoop, and then looked expectantly at Jeff and Childs. They did not expect for a moment to be given leave of absence, but they

did expect to give Bilious a tremendous roughing the moment he was exposed.

"Tell 'em it's all right," Jeff whispered to Childs.

The foreman could hardly bring himself to speak. Jeff, he was convinced, was nothing more than an irresponsible, swell-headed kid. This would cost the company several hundred dollars, but if they wanted to send that kind of a manager it was their own lookout.

"All right, boys, what he says goes," he said bitterly.

For a moment the men were utterly dumbfounded, and then with shrill yells of delight they fled to the bunkhouse. But Jeff had noticed that one man who had been in the bunkhouse the night before had not been present, and he was one of the three solo-playing cowpunchers. Now he observed that the other two went directly to the corrals, and did not visit the bunkhouse to dress up.

"What became of that fellow they call Montasano Steed?" he asked Childs.

Childs gave an almost imperceptible start. "He left for the cow camp at daylight—figgered to git breakfast there."

"There are other men working here then?"

"Sure. We've got two cow camps on different sides of the range, four men at each camp," was the

reply. "This is damn' foolishness, lettin' all these men go right when the work needs doin'," Childs added peevishly.

"This is Saturday. You can follow 'em in to Salina in your car and tell 'em it's all a mistake. Give 'em Sunday off and have them back here to go to work Tuesday morning," Jeff directed.

"Mr. Childs, I reckon I'll be havin' a look around the range while the boys are celebratin'," Bilious said, suddenly coming back to them. "If that there boy of yours ain't a-goin' to town I'd like to have him saddle up an' go with me."

"No," Ezra Childs roared. "Yo're givin' orders here all right, but my family ain't on the company payroll, so I'll be damned if yuh can boss them."

Bilious was taken aback only momentarily. "Then I reckon I'll have to ask you to go with me," he said.

Jeff stepped hastily into the breach, "I'm not doing a thing; why can't I go?"

"Shore, yuh'll do," Bilious grinned. "All I want's a chore boy."

The men, with the exception of Ed Haines and Gilly Moore, dashed away toward Salina in a cloud of dust. It was sixty miles, but the men thought little of the ride with the prospect of a high time at the end of it.

At the corral Bilious showed judgment by roping himself a good horse. "Shall I ketch you a gentle one?" he asked Jeff.

"Please."

"There's a good one," volunteered Ray Childs, the sole spectator, pointing out a short-eared little gray.

"To let alone," Bilious said drily. He twirled his rope and caught a tall, good-looking bay.

Jeff had ordered a new saddle from a Pueblo saddle maker just before starting, but it, of course, had not arrived. He had to borrow an extra saddle from one of the men, and as it was a badly jimmed old shell he was not eager for a long ride. But while he was saddling up Bilious rode to the house and returned with his warbag tied behind the saddle. Bilious was leaving the ranch.

They rode quietly until they were out of sight of the ranch, except that Bilious occasionally chuckled to himself.

"How far are we going?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, 'bout forty mile. Yuh'll make it back to-morrer all right, though yuh may be some sore," Bilious laughed.

"You mean you ain't coming back?" Jeff demanded.

"You guessed it," the lengthy puncher chuckled.

"Boy, I'll have to tell yuh. I'd 'a' kept shut a while longer if it'd been old Whiskers or his boy along, but I'm goin' to tell you now. When I hit that Salina town I was hossless an' damn' nigh busted, an' had a hundred miles tuh go. An' I'm gittin' too plumb to my destination by posin' as the new manager of this outfit—which said manager I ain't never seen."

"That's where you're mistaken," Jeff said quietly. "You're looking at him right now?"

"Huh? What?" Bilious started so abruptly that he scared his horse, and it all but jumped out from under him.

"I'm Jeff Singleton, and the only one you fooled was yourself," Jeff remarked evenly.

For five minutes they rode in utter silence.

"Why the hell didn't I guess it?" Bilious asked then. His lips parted in a grin. "But I worked my way fer sixty miles an' got put up like a prince over night. Yuh can't 'deny that."

"You're a good actor," Jeff admitted.

"What's the plan now—goin' to set me afoot?"

"Ain't decided yet whether to do that or shoot you."

"Seein' yuh ain't got no gun I'd prefer anything to bein' set afoot," Bilious said.

"Well," said Jeff judicially, "since I haven't got

a gun, and you don't want to walk, the only thing that seems to be left is for me to hire you."

"I'm half inclined to lissen to yore talk," Bilious declared.

CHAPTER IV

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW

JEFF stopped his horse and motioned for the other man to do likewise. "You're aware that you've obtained valuable service through false pretense, and are also riding a horse that don't belong to you. Likewise you know that I could have you sent up for impersonating me," he said severely.

"Mebbe I carried the joke too far, but givin' them waddies a week off was too good a chance tuh resist. I don't reckon yuh figger on arrestin' me, an' as far as stealin' the hoss is concerned the reason I was takin' yuh along was tuh send the hoss back so they wouldn't have anythin' on me," Bilious defended himself.

"Where were you going?"

"To a ranch over here on the Dirty Devil where I used tuh work. I been hopin' they might kill me a fatted calf."

"Nothing sure about it then?"

"Well, reasonable—reasonable shore. They kinda like old Bilious Burket down there," he said modestly.

"Well, Bilious, I don't hold a grudge because of what you did. I really enjoyed it. I believe it let me get a line on some things that I might not have found out otherwise. I've got a hard job ahead of me here, and I believe you are the man who can help me out. Would seventy-five a month be any incentive to you?" Jeff asked.

"Yuh're puttin' it tuh me just like that—man to man—an' no comeback on account o' this other scrape if I refuse?" Bilious asked.

"Just like that," Jeff assured. "If yuh don't want the job ride on and send the horse back when you get an opportunity."

"Then I'll take the job," Bilious said promptly. "What d'ye want me tuh do?"

"Depends. Now tell me just what sort of a proposition did old man Pickering make to you last night?"

"Oh, that? The ole boy intimated that he'd had a fine large share in runnin' these other managers outa here, an' sorta implied that it was up tuh me whether he'd have to repeat with me. I gathered that if I behaved muhself it might be worth my while."

"And how did you meet it?"

"Well, I sorta hinted that I'd r'ar'd up on my dignity on account o' strangers bein' present; but

that among friends I was allus amenable tuh reason." Bilious grinned.

This was better than Jeff had hoped for. "Did they offer you any bribes?"

"Nothin' like that. The idee was that I was tuh tend tuh my own business—fer which they was willin' to give me a suitable reward if I done it good enough."

"And did Ezra Childs have a hand in that, too?" Jeff asked, and for some reason his heart seemed to stop beating while he waited for the answer.

"Nope. That ole foreman protested all the time that there really wasn't much rustlin' goin' on."

"I'm glad Childs is honest," Jeff said with relief. "Now, I'm wondering just what the Pickerings will think of your trick."

"They ain't agoin' to like it none too well when they find out they been made foolish; but we should worry if they can't take a joke," Bilious said lightly.

"They may make it warm for you. They're said to be bad people," Jeff warned.

"If yo're tryin' tuh feel me out I kin tell yuh that I ain't in a damn' bit more danger than you are. Do you figger on runnin' from 'em?" Bilious demanded.

"I certainly don't."

"Then neither do I."

And Jeff perceived that this queer puncher was not at all lacking in nerve. Of his honesty he could not be so sure; yet he could not believe that Bilious was a crook, despite the man's recent escapade.

"I'm minded to ask you to ride over to this Pick and Ring ranch," Jeff grinned.

"As you or me?" Bilious grinned back.

"That'll depend. I've got a notion that they may already know about the deception, but I'd give a lot to find out."

"I reckon I kin git the information," Bilious said.

"All right, go ahead; but you'd better be careful. Those people are bad. Have you got a gun?"

"Shore—in my warbag."

"You know this range?"

"I've rode over it some. My stompin' ground as I told yuh is lower down, but I know the cricks and valleys well enough tuh find my way around up here," Bilious vouchsafed.

"All right then—report back to the ranch as soon as you can," Jeff instructed, and turned his horse back toward the buildings.

A few minutes after both Jeff and Bilious had passed out of sight two men rode out from behind a hedge of oak brush nearly a quarter of a mile away.

"I thought it was too raw all the time," Ed

Haines remarked. "There was an understandin' between 'em or they never would dared pull a stunt of that kind."

"That's right. The lanky guy is a detective, I reckon," Gilly Moore opined.

"An' he's on his way to the Pick'n Ring," Haines said, and both men laughed.

Meantime Bilious Burket was jogging quietly along toward Horse Valley, where the Pick and Ring ranch was located. The puncher's none too handsome face was now moody and thoughtful. The joke he had played on the Cross Anchor had now almost passed from his mind. He had never been able to resist a practical joke; but after they were over he forgot them. He liked the way Jeff Singleton had taken this affair, and in a way was glad that the joke had ended as it had. He was not averse to getting a job, though he knew he would be able to get one when he reached Cabin Creek in the Dirty Devil country. Rube Fellows was still foreman of the Cabin Creek Horse Company, and Rube would always give him a job—that he knew.

It was a practical joke which had led Bilious to quit Rube Fellows three years before. It had been suggested to him that it would be a good joke on an old fellow living a few miles down the river to have

him make a ten mile trip for nothing. A strange character had started down the impassable canyon of the Dirty Devil with a cart and a burro. He had been obliged to abandon the cart with a few worthless trinkets, while he took the burro and went on by another route. It was suggested to Bilious by another rider that he ride by old man Bullivant's place and magnify the cart to an immigrant wagon loaded with valuables. Being an opportunity to show his talent as a convincing liar Bilious had done as bidden, and old Bullivant departed post haste to recover what he could.

It was a harmless enough joke, but the kick-back was that when old man Bullivant returned to his cabin he found that his granddaughter had disappeared—and so, it developed a little later, had the man who suggested the joke to Bilious!

Three months later Marie Bullivant returned to her grandfather, ashamed and broken-hearted. And as soon as he learned of it Bilious Burket quit his job and left the Dirty Devil. After a three-year search for the man Bilious was returning to his old range, but he had not altogether given up hope of finding the man who had called himself Arnold Bahr.

He admitted to himself that he was homesick to see the folks in Cabin Creek Basin, but he told him-

self he would contrive an opportunity to visit them a little later, and having a job would be better than going back there broke.

He passed numerous cattle on his way, but saw nobody until he entered the sunken depression that was called Horse Valley. What kept this country open range was the scarcity of water for irrigation. All available supplies had been appropriated long ago by the first settlers, and used to develop wonderful hay ranches such as this one in Horse Valley and the Cross Anchor ranch. But that had been the end of development. The great bulk of the country remained Government land, and would continue so.

Bilious knew, too, that there could not be hay enough raised to feed more than a fraction of the cattle then on the range. The remainder, he knew, were wintered on Desolation Desert, which bordered on his own favorite range of the Dirty Devil country. Though he knew but casually the country he was now in, he was thoroughly at home on the desert, and if there was a great deal of wholesale rustling going on, there, he fancied, was where it was mostly pulled off.

He ambled down into the valley and along a road that skirted a great field of growing hay until he struck the headquarters of the Pickering ranch. A

high pole gate with the insignia of the ranch upon the crossbar was shut across the road. There was a sign upon the gatepost and Bilious drew up close and read it.

IF YOU HAVE BUSINESS HERE COME IN—
IF NOT STAY OUT

Bilious took out a blunt lead pencil and laboriously crossed out five words, leaving the sign to read:

YOU HAVE BUSINESS HERE COME IN

He rode through the gate, then stopped and tentatively felt of the warbag behind his saddle. He could feel the hard lump there that was his gun, and for a moment he was minded to take it out and wear it. However, he quickly decided against it. If he should get into trouble with the Pickerings a gun would only give them an excuse to kill him.

It was half a mile on to the planless, rambling yards and buildings. Five or six men were fooling about with some colts in a corral, and Bilious rode slowly toward them.

At his approach one of the men on the outside

suddenly gave a start, spoke hurriedly to the man at his side, none other than Tub Pickering, and hurried away.

Something about the man's walk looked familiar to Bilious, and he suddenly touched his horse with the spurs; but the fellow had disappeared behind a shed before he could get close enough to identify him.

Tub Pickering turned to face the visitor, and the other men promptly abandoned their work and ranged themselves along the fence—not too close together, Bilious observed.

"Howdy, Colonel," Billious greeted jovially. "Gittin' in a few tuh break?"

"Practically the idee," Tub admitted. "I'm takin' it yuh didn't ride over heah this mornin' jus' to make a social call."

"That was the idee—nothin' like gittin' acquainted with yore neighbors," Bilious declared.

"We don't figger thataway. Did yuh read that sign on the gate?"

"Yeah—nice bit o' printin'. Who's the artist?"

"Yo're purty witty, stranger, but we don't have time to laugh at jokes," Tub said testily. "What's the proposition yuh come over heah to make?"

"Well, tuh tell the truth I come over here to do some more listenin'. What yuh said last night

had a mighty pleasin' tone, an' I'd like tuh hear some more of it."

"Meanin' which?" Tub demanded bluntly.

"If I got yuh right yuh was willin' tuh be powerful friendly with me just fer tendin' my own business. I been thinkin' it over an' decided that I could mebbe git real active a tendin' tuh my own business; 'specially down around Desolation way next winter—if I was paid fer it," Bilious said hopefully.

"Yo're makin' a proposition to me that yuh want me he'p yuh steal Cross Anchor cattle?" Tub demanded bluntly.

"Quite the reverse," Bilious grinned.

Tub Pickering was a man slow of thought and quick of temper. "By Gawd, do I look like a man who kin be fooled by a grinnin' monkey like you?" he demanded. "Yuh got the laugh on me las' night by pertendin' to be the new manager o' the Cross Anchor, while that sneakin' damn' dude was laughin' up his sleeve; but yuh can't put it over me twice."

"So some o' the boys did ride over in the night an' let yuh know," Bilious remarked drily.

"He's a damn' detective," one of the men inside the corral ground out savagely.

Tub Pickering sprang for Bilious, and the cow-puncher observed that the men inside had him cov-

ered with their guns. To attempt to run would be folly.

Bilious was dragged off his horse by the irate rancher and shaken like a rat. He gathered himself to put up the best fight he could, but when he drew back to strike another man grabbed his arm. For a few minutes he thought he would be shaken out of his clothes by Pickering as he was being pummeled by the punchers, and then the men were thrust aside as Gus Pickering fairly swam his way through them and grabbed his father.

"Lay off," Gus ordered crisply, but it required a brief struggle to get Tub to release the limp Bilious.

"It was a silly game for 'em to try to work on us," Gus said, "but remember that the new manager over there had the reports of the others that we were stealin' their cattle. This ought to learn 'em that they'd better leave us alone."

"All right," Tub croaked hoarsely. "Go back to yore dude boss an' tell him from me never to show his face on my ranch or my range. An' the same applies to you."

"An' consider that you're gittin' off damn' lucky," Gus contributed.

"Much obliged," Bilious said, when he recovered breath enough to speak. "You fellers ain't got all this straight, however. I never seen that feller Sin-

gleton till yesterday. I was bluffin' my way through the country, an' this mornin' when I found they'd wised up to me over there I come over here tuh see if I couldn't work you for a few meals. Never dreamed they'd sent a man over tuh tell yuh who I was."

"Yet you're ridin' a Cross Anchor horse," Gus said.

"They loaned him tuh me," Bilious defended.

"Where do yuh want to go?" Gus asked.

"Well, I was headin' for the Dirty Devil."

"All right, I'll see that yuh git there," Gus said crisply. "Git him another horse, a couple of you fellows, an' then see him safe to the head of Wagon Track Gorge. He can find his way from there on foot. I'll be goin' over to see Mattie tomorrow an' I'll take this horse home."

The men laughed and proceeded to catch up the horses. It was hard for Bilious to keep the grin on his face, for he knew what impended. It was forty miles to the head of Wagon Track Gorge, a narrow, steep gash in the mountains fifteen miles in length, that led down to the Dirty Devil country. And it was twenty miles from there to the Cabin Creek basin. Either way he might choose to go from there would mean a long and painful walk. It meant, too, that they were sending him out of

the country deliberately, and his return would be accepted as a challenge by them.

At the same time he realized that refusal would not help his case in the least.

"Would yuh mind donatin' me a pair o' shoes?" he requested. "I think a lot o' these boots an' I'd shore hate tuh scuff 'em up on that walk."

"You'll be damn' lucky if it's just yore feet gits scuffed up," Gus told him,

CHAPTER V

THE BRONCO BUSTERS

JEFF SINGLETON dismissed Bilious from his mind as soon as that worthy was gone from sight. The puncher's action in representing himself, or rather allowing others to think that he was the new manager, was a mere episode that was much more laughable than serious.

Through that episode Tub Pickering had been led to make overtures which he would probably never have made to Jeff, and those overtures convinced the new manager that Pickering was at the bottom of the attempted spoliation of the Cross Anchor.

With this much to go on Jeff really could not see why the rustling could not be prevented. Half of the battle, he figured, was in knowing whom to fight. True enough he would have to make sure of the loyalty of his own men; the rest lay in catching the crooks at their work. Very simple!

Already the first steps to ascertain the attitude of the Cross Anchor men had been taken, and this, too, he owed to Bilious. Had it not been for that

elongated puncher Jeff could not have spent the night in the bunkhouse and got the line he had on the men there. Montasano Steed had been missing that morning, and Jeff was thoroughly convinced that the fellow had ridden to the Pick and Ring ranch to tell the Pickerings how they had been deceived. It seemed equally certain that Ed Haines and Gilly Moore were in with him, and all associated with the Pick and Ring. With these three men, whom Ezra Childs had hired expressly to fight the rustlers, actually in league with the cattle thieves, it was easy to see how the foreman had been deceived while the crooks prospered.

He really expected little from Bilious' visit to the Pick and Ring, and at the most only confirmation of his guess that Montasano Steed had already ridden over there.

To that mysterious, unnamable terror which had sent his predecessors hurrying back to the city with their resignations in their hands he gave no thought. None of them, he had been told, had vouchsafed the real reason for their sudden departure, though each man had obviously been given the scare of his life. Upon only one point had they committed themselves—they all agreed that the Pick and Ring outfit was responsible for all the trouble.

He took his time getting back to the ranch, wait-

ing to make sure that Childs had taken the car and gone in pursuit of the hilarious hired men. Jeff had not been entirely thoughtless in allowing Bilious to send the men away, as it would give him time to familiarize himself a little with the ranch without having to study the men, and he hoped that their actions when they returned from town would reveal something of their real attitude. Being rather a firm believer in the efficacy of a new broom, Jeff had come to the ranch prepared to discharge the whole crew from the foreman down and build up a new organization. Indeed, that had been suggested to him by Homer Graves. Yet a sense of fairness kept him from taking any abrupt action lest injustice be done to good men; and he now entertained a hope that the brief vacation would bring the men back to their jobs with a new spirit, and with a good will toward him for having permitted them to take the lay-off.

He had also completely given up the idea of replacing the foreman. Childs, he felt, was self-willed and obstinate, but loyal. He had served many years on the ranch and it would break his heart to have to leave. And a still more potent reason for having the foreman remain was his daughter, Mattie.

As Jeff rode up to the corral which had held the

saddle horses he heard a yell, and a moment later he saw young Ray Childs atop the selfsame little gray horse which the boy had tried to persuade Jeff himself to ride that morning. The gray was bucking furiously and bawling at every jump. Ray's dingy sombrero rose and fell with more or less regularity the first few jumps. Then the hat soared into the air as the boy grabbed the post; which proved insufficient to keep him in the saddle. A side twist on the part of the gray and Ray soared into the air following his hat. He came down with a hollow thump, rolled over twice in the dust of the corral, and got up, smiling sheepishly as he saw Jeff grinning at him.

"I'll bet I stuck him longer'n yuh could anyway," the boy asserted.

"You want to think more about keeping your balance than gripping so hard with your legs," Jeff advised.

"Mebbe yuh can show me how to ride him," the boy retorted.

Jeff looked carefully about. The yards were deserted, and the corral was out of sight of the house. He got off his horse and commenced to pull his saddle. He had not ridden a bronco with malice aforethought for a number of years. But when only eighteen he had won the bucking championship at

a State fair, and he rather wanted to find out if he had lost his cunning. He was sure anyway that the gray could not throw him.

They caught the gray and after some little difficulty changed saddles. Jeff forked the bronco without ceremony, and with a vicious grunt the gray went after him. Jeff quickly found that he had not lost his ancient cunning. He rode the horse straight up and fanned from ear to hip. There are few joys like conquering a pitching horse. Jeff restrained the whoops he wanted to utter, but his face wore a grin of triumph.

And then he found himself sailing wildly through the air, with the floor of the dusty corral rushing up to meet him. He came down with legs spread wide apart, and rammed his face into the dirt. The rigging of the old saddle had parted and the saddle was still under him.

"Oh, lookit him, Sis, lookit him!" he heard Ray howl joyfully, while he was digging the corral dirt out of his eyes and mouth.

"Is that how yuh balance 'em?" the boy demanded.

Jeff in his turn grinned sheepishly, and had no idea what a grotesque appearance he made with his shining white teeth against the background of his face with its mask of dirt.

"I reckon the gray holds the honors for the day," Jeff admitted ruefully.

"You rode good while you did stay," Mattie consoled him. There was a smile on her face, but it was tolerant rather than amused. And there was a somewhat concerned look in her eyes.

Jeff was by no means slow-witted and he read the meaning of her tolerant concern. She was disappointed in him. Here he was, a man with grave responsibilities, playing at bronco busting with a fifteen-year-old boy. He realized now that from the first he had shown no inclination to do other than joke and play. He could read her thoughts as well as though she had put them into words. She thought him a good fellow, but entirely too juvenile to be managing an outfit the size of the Cross Anchor.

"By golly yuh're all right. Montasano Steed himself couldn't have made a better ride than you did till yuh struck the dirt," Ray generously acknowledged the prowess of his rival.

"Say," the boy said a moment later, "what are we a-goin' to call yuh? I don't like to have to 'mister' anybody."

"I don't like to be 'mistered.'" Jeff said promptly. "Call me Jeff; all of you." He looked around for Mattie, but the girl had walked away.

He had a sickening feeling that he was showing up badly in comparison with the cool, confident Gus Pickering. Yet that was only a personal matter. If the men shared the girl's opinion that he lacked dignity he would get little support from them. He had an instinctive dislike for abnormally dignified people, but he began to realize that he would have to act a little more mature if he hoped to accomplish anything.

"Say, what'd yuh do with Headache?" Ray demanded.

"Huh? Oh, you mean Bilious," Jeff laughed. "He went over to the Pick and Ring ranch."

"Comin' back?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if he failed to show up, though I offered him a job," Jeff said.

"Dad is sure sore at that feller—an' I don't believe he thinks much of you," the boy said frankly.

"I'm sorry we deceived him."

"Well, he didn't think much of them other managers either, so that hadn't ort to worry yuh," the boy announced.

Jeff frowned. Always there seemed to be indications that the main trouble on the ranch was a lack of harmony between foreman and manager, and the fault lay with Ezra Childs. Jeff knew well

enough how hard it was going to be to do anything without the whole-hearted support of the foreman. Was he, then, going to be obliged to discharge Childs after all? His reason told him that it would be the wise thing to do. Childs had been there so long that he resented an assumption of authority by another. It perhaps was made worse by the fact that he had held his position under another ownership, and likely enough secretly resented the foreclosure which had removed his old employer.

On the other hand, the sentimental reasons all came back to him. It was a distressing problem, and one that would take time to solve.

He heard Ray suggesting that he would like to show him the way to the cow camp, and since he did not feel like staying around the ranch he accepted the offer.

CHAPTER VI

A DISCOVERY

IT was nearly two o'clock when Jeff and his guide reached the cow camp; yet there was a fire and two men were cooking dinner as they rode up.

"Here's Ed an' Gilly. Gee, we're in luck! We'll make 'em cook dinner for us!" Ray exulted.

The men showed no emotion whatever at the intrusion. Ed Haines merely looked up and nodded. "Yuh'll have to fry some more steaks," he said to Moore.

"Sorry to trouble you, but we're about starved," Jeff said.

"'Twon't be any trouble," Moore remarked as he set about preparing more food. "This Pick an' Ring beef cooks mighty easy."

Jeff felt that the remark was only to lead him on, so he only smiled and remained silent.

"How come you boys didn't go to town with the rest?" Jeff asked presently.

"Plumb silly to be rushin' off that way on the say-so of a loony cowpuncher," Haines said gruffly.

"Still, I gave my consent," Jeff maintained.

"In the first place we had no urge tuh go tuh town, an' in the second place we have tuh be on the job if we keep these cattle from bein' rustled," Haines said.

"But Childs tells me there really hasn't been much stealing," Jeff objected.

"Rats!" Haines said contemptuously. "There ain't a week passes there ain't some stole."

"As bad as that? Why can't you catch those rustlers?" Jeff demanded.

"Simplest thing in the world. This range is so big it can't all be watched. When we look for 'em to raid here they raid Pickerings. When we look for 'em to raid Pickerings they come here."

"But I thought—I thought this Pickering outfit was supposed to be the ones that——"

"Yuh've been misled," Haines said drily. "They're losin' as many cattle as we are. They all go down the Dirty Devil, an' once in that country there's no chance tuh locate 'em."

Here was an entirely different angle to the situation, but it only served to confirm Jeff's opinion that these three men were in with the Pick and Ring people. Then Haines proceeded to elucidate.

"Ez Childs an' Tub Pickering never got along. I don't say as I blame Ez any, but the hard feelin's has led these fellers that comes here before you to

think the Pickerings were to blame for the stealin'. Naturally that made Tub an' Gus sore. So instead o' goin' after the real rustlers there's just been trouble between the ranches.

"Now me an' my pals have figgered out what becomes of the cattle, an' we've been tryin' to git the Pickerings to go in with us an' put a stop tuh it. About all we've accomplished so far is tuh have people think we're just scared of the Pickerings. Sometimes I think I'll throw up my job and quit the damned country."

If Haines was not sincere then he was a good actor. For the first time Jeff seriously considered the innocence of the Pick and Ring outfit. If Haines was right then the three men were indeed valuable, and it was his job, as manager, to get on friendly terms with the Pickerings.

Jeff had picked up some information that morning from Ray's boyish chatter about ranch affairs. The boy did not like Haines, Moore or Steed; though he was inclined to admire their ability. Haines, he declared, could whip any man in the country unless it be Tub or Gus Pickering. Montasano Steed was the best bronco fighter in the country, and all three of them were all-around, good men with horse, gun and rope. But the boy had confided that he believed his father was wrong in

thinking there was little or no rustling going on, and he gave it as his private opinion that the Pickerings were doing the stealing.

"I've seen some things," the boy had said darkly, but he refused to say what he had seen.

"What does your sister think?" Jeff had asked, though ashamed of himself a moment later for taking this indirect way of getting the girl's opinion.

"She thinks like I do, only she don't think Gus knows anything about it," Ray answered promptly.

Jeff had found himself rather wanting to believe that the Pickerings were guilty, and this of itself made him chary of accepting Haines' hypothesis. Yet his innate sense of fairness caused him now to give the Pickerings the benefit of the doubt until further evidence was uncovered. But Haines' version had caused him to revise his hasty opinion of the ease with which the rustling could be stopped. Now he had to admit he had no idea whatever, at least with any proof behind it, who was doing the rustling; nor even that any rustling was being done, assuming that Ezra Childs might be right.

"Well, I hope to take some definite steps soon to put a stop to the losses, whatever their source," Jeff said to Haines, and was aware of the lameness of the remark.

"In the meantime keep on with what you've been

doing," he added. He thought he saw a flicker of a smile cross Gilly Moore's face, and instantly all his suspicion of the three riders flared up again.

After dinner Moore and Ray washed up the dishes while Jeff and Haines discussed the condition of the range and the cattle, and Haines went somewhat more into detail about his theory of the rustling. The Dirty Devil country and the Desolation Desert, Jeff gathered, were a vast hinterland that was little less than a rustlers' paradise.

"Where's the other boys that belong here?" Ray once looked up and asked.

"I sent 'em over to Timber Creek," Haines said briefly. This was the first intimation Jeff had had that the man had any authority over the other men.

Just when Jeff and the boy were preparing to start home Montasano Steed rode up. Jeff looked the fellow over with more interest than he had done the night before, because then Haines had held the center of the stage.

Steed was a moderate-sized man, inclined to be dark of complexion, with a graceful carriage of which neither of the other men could boast, for Haines was built on the draft horse plan, while Gilly Moore was too small and jerky in his movements to be graceful. Every movement of Steed's spelled efficiency.

"Montasano, the new supe here wants tuh know where yuh been all day," Haines addressed the new arrival.

"Why yuh see, suh, I've been over tuh the Pick an' Ring ranch in Horse Valley," the man said promptly.

"Couldn't you have talked with Pickerings when they were at our ranch?" Jeff asked.

"Could have, but I had to ride over there to identify a horse," Steed shrugged.

"Childs told me yuh'd gone to the cow camp," Jeff said mildly.

"It saves trouble not to tell him when we go to the Pick and Ring," Steed laughed, and the subject was dropped.

"Did you happen to see the fellow who calls himself Bilious over there?" Jeff asked then.

"No, can't say that I did," Steed answered.

They found that Ezra Childs had not yet returned from his trip to Salina when they got home. Jeff went to the now vacant bunkhouse, but presently Ray joined him there.

"Maw says for you to move your things up into the manager's room in the house, an' supper will soon be ready," he reported.

Jeff took his time moving his things up to the house. Somehow it seemed a sort of anticlimax,

and he could not forget that tolerant smile upon Mattie's face.

It was the girl who showed him the room, and offered to make any changes in the arrangement of furniture that he might desire.

"It's fine," he told her. "I don't want to be any trouble. I'm sorry for the trouble I must have caused last night."

"That's all right," she laughed. "That man was funny, and father will get over it. I do wish, though, that the Pickerings had not been misled. It'll be hard for them to understand."

"It served them right for trying to bulldoze the new manager right off the bat," Jeff asserted.

"Old Tub Pickering is impossible all right," Mattie confessed. "There has been trouble between these two ranches for years—long before the present owners of this one got control—and it has chiefly been his fault. Father has been stubborn, too."

"It seemed to me that the young fellow shared his dad's view pretty much," Jeff said jealously.

"Gus is different. He would like to have peace. If you and him——"

"I'll first have to be convinced that the Pickerings are not stealing our cattle," Jeff interrupted. He was rather ashamed of himself for the remark, for he

knew that his chief reason for making it was to take a thrust at Gus, to see how the girl would react.

"I'm sure you are wrong," Mattie said coldly. "Somebody on the Pick and Ring ranch may be stealing, but it's a mistake to accuse everybody there of being guilty."

She went out, and Jeff realized that he had blundered in implying that Gus was a thief. It seemed clear enough that she was in love with the fellow, and Jeff knew that he should be willing to let it go at that; but he could not deny the appeal that this girl made to him. She stirred his emotions as no other woman had ever been able to do, and some way he could not bear to think of Gus Pickering winning her. Gus, he thought bitterly, was a bully and a thief.

"Lord, I'm getting plumb warped in my thinking," he murmured a moment later. "I'll be wanting Gus Pickering to be a thief so hard directly that I won't be able to consider any other possibility—and when I get that way I'll be through."

But the next evening when he saw Gus Pickering ride up in all his Sunday finery to call on Mattie, all his animosity toward the fellow flowed back.

"I've got no right to be jealous. She don't care a thing for me—even thinks I'm as kiddish as her brother. If she wants to fall in love with that bully

it's her business," he argued with himself; but no matter how many times he repeated it the formula gave him no satisfaction.

He saw that Gus was leading the horse Bilious had ridden away, and this made it necessary for him to speak to the man. Otherwise he would have ignored him.

Gus greeted him with a wide grin. "Hello, Tenderfoot. Clever little joke yuh played on us the other night, wasn't it?"

"I was a little amused at your failure to bluff my understudy," Jeff retorted.

"He bluffs best who bluffs last," Gus paraphrased. "Here's yore understudy's horse."

"Where is he?" Jeff demanded, with a sudden fear that Bilious had paid dearly for his imposture.

"I really couldn't say—but he left. I thought it no more than neighborly to bring the horse back," Gus said with a laugh, and strolled on to the house.

Jeff turned the horse loose in a pasture and went back to his room. He was genuinely concerned over the fate of Bilious, and blamed himself for having sent the puncher over there at all. He was sure they would not dare resort to murder; but there were other ways of making it disagreeable for a man. And he remembered what Homer Graves had told him concerning the fright of the previous managers—a fright so tremendous that none of

them would tell what had caused it. Whatever that ordeal had been he felt sure they would try to make him go through it. Of one thing he was certain—they could not scare him out. The sooner they attempted it the better.

There was nothing he could do for Bilious now, and he tried to think of other things. But the partition walls in the house were thin, and from another room he caught the buzz of voices. He could not hear the words, but occasionally he could hear Mattie's musical laughter joining with the louder, sardonic laughter of Gus Pickering.

He tried to read but could not. Then he tried writing letters, but with no more success. His pen began to trace meaningless marks on the fresh paper. Gradually some of the marks began to take shape, and with a start he realized that subconsciously he had been tracing out various cattle brands. The last one he had made was the Cross Anchor. Then, consciously, he traced out the Pick and Ring brand as he had noticed it on Gus Pickering's saddle horse.

For a long time he studied the brands he had drawn; then a queer, sardonic smile appeared upon his face.

He believed that at last he was upon his way to a solution of the cattle stealing mystery.

CHAPTER VII

CARDINAL BUTTES

EZRA CHILDS grumbly reported that the men had given him the horse laugh when he overtook them on the way to Salina. They had been given a week's vacation on full pay by the manager, and they proposed to have it all unless the manager himself ordered them to come back. Had the whole affair not been a joke they would have meekly returned, but as they knew it was a hoax they felt safe in carrying the joke to the limit.

Monday night four of the crew returned and reported to Jeff that they were ready to go to work. The spokesman was no other than the jocular Lem Tooke, whom Jeff had saved from a possible licking from Ed Haines.

"We're ready for business, Mr. Singleton; but them other birds are all drunk an' wouldn't come back. I figgered that yuh'd need all the help yuh could git out here, an' I'm sorry I tried to kid yuh the other night," Lem said.

"That's all right; I brought it on myself," Jeff said.

"As I said we're ready for anything," Lem continued, "but there's one favor I'd like to ask."

"Yes?" Jeff said noncommittally.

"I've been here a long while, an' just as soon as there's a vacancy I'd like to git a steady ridin' job. So would the other boys here."

"I don't know about that," Jeff said. "Until I get more familiar with things I'll have to leave that end of the business with Mr. Childs."

Lem lowered his voice. "I know. Just the same I know somethin' of what yo're up against here. Ain't I seen these other managers come an' go, while all the time the outfit is goin' broke?"

"It's been my policy to keep out o' trouble, but I ain't had my eyes shut. The way you talked up to Ed Haines showed me that you had nerve. These other managers have all been chicken-hearted, but with a real man on the job mebbe we can be some help."

Jeff sized the man up more carefully, and was not as favorably impressed as he might have been. Tooke was a big man, though with more fat than muscle, and he had a full-moon face with a pair of crafty eyes set squarely in the middle of it. Jeff decided that he was of the familiar type known as a sucker—not the easy mark kind, but the hired man who seeks the easy jobs by currying favor with

the boss. Jeff had never had any use for that kind of a man. Still he realized that the man might be useful to him, and he had need of all the assistance he could get.

"I'll speak to Mr. Childs and see what he can do for you," he promised. He knew better than to question such a man. If Tooke knew anything of value he would be sure to volunteer it, whereas, if he were asked, he would be coy and try to give the information more importance than it deserved.

In this he was right. The next morning Tooke found the opportunity to draw him aside.

"I don't want to carry tales," the man said, "an' I ain't got nothin' ag'in' Ez Childs; but just the same, Mr. Singleton, I wouldn't trust him too much if I was you. He's in with them three gun-totin' hombres yuh seen the other night, an' they're no good."

"If you've got any concrete evidence to offer against any man on this ranch I'll listen, but I've no time for opinions or gossip," Jeff said curtly.

"Well, I happen to know that last night Childs went down along the east canal pertendin' to change the water an' I follered him. He stopped down where the ditch goes under the fence an' purty soon up rides them three bad guys. I sneaks along in the grass under the ditch. It was purty dark an' I

felt safe, but I had to be cautious. When I got close I heard Ed Haines say: 'We got sixty head back of the Cardinal Buttes. Can yuh fix it so we can work 'em out without this new manager missin' us?'

"An' Childs says, 'Better leave 'em there a few days till we see how he's goin' to act.'

"They talked some more but I couldn't hear what was said. Howsomever, I got back before Ez did, an' heard him greet them fellers like he hadn't seen 'em for several days. They got up before daylight an' beat it without breakfast."

Jeff was breathing hard. Here, indeed, seemed something tangible. And yet it implicated Ezra Childs and left the Pickerings out. That was regrettable but it was his job to deal with facts.

"Where are these Cardinal Buttes?" he asked.

"They're a good twenty-five miles from here an' the range there ain't used much in the summer on account o' no water. But I reckon there's still some water in the potholes."

"You said you wanted a job of riding. Can you show me the way over there?"

"I know this range like a book, but it'll be a long, hard ride."

"Have the cook put up grub enough to last two men three days. Pack it and a bed on a couple of

extra horses and be ready to travel in an hour," Jeff directed.

"All right, but they're bad hombres to monkey with, Mr. Singleton," Lem said. His lips seemed to be pretty dry, for he was continually wetting them with his tongue.

"Then you'd better take a gun," Jeff grunted, and turned away.

Ray Childs was on hand when the two men got ready to ride. "Say, Jeff, can't I go along?" the boy begged.

"I'm afraid not, Ray. Some other time," Jeff refused.

The boy was plainly disappointed. He had taken a strong liking to Jeff despite their short acquaintance and Jeff liked the boy. Yet if the trip panned out it was possible that evidence would be secured to send his father to the penitentiary. For that reason Ray could not possibly be taken along.

"I sure don't think much o' yore choice o' company," Ray said with a malicious grin at Lem Tooke.

"Yuh'll be grinnin' outa the other corner o' yore mouth one o' these days," Lem snarled.

Once out on the trail with a definite object in view, with a good horse between his knees and a gun swinging at his hip Jeff for the first time felt

sure of himself. Now, he thought, he was worthy of being called the son of old Jack Singleton.

It was plain to see that Lem Tooke had no joy in the enterprise and already was regretting having spoken too quickly. The fellow was painfully cautious, and after they had ridden for several hours Jeff learned that he had taken a circuitous route with the object of throwing possible pursuers off the trail. As a result it was almost dark before they sighted the three red-capped buttes that formed an almost perfect triangle rising above the floor of the plateau.

For two thirds of the distance up to their crest the buttes were covered with high, thick grass, and an occasional sparse growth of timber. The top third, however, was a sort of red sandstone formation which was utterly barren, and from which the buttes derived their name.

"Them cattle is most likely bein' held in between the buttes an' I don't reckon we'd better ride in there," Lem said. "I b'lieve I can find a pothole down toward the end o' the biggest one."

"But that's as far as it is in between 'em," Jeff objected. "There's still time to get in there before dark."

"But if we meet anybody——"

"Even if stolen cattle are being held here Haines

and the others won't be here, because Childs told them to wait a few days," Jeff pointed out.

Thus encouraged Tooke led the way between two of the buttes along a dim trail that was but one of many made by cattle when the ground was soft. The buttes jutted closely together, and presently most of the trails ran into the one which skirted a deep wash in the bottom of the defile.

They had proceeded along this wash for half a mile before the trails splattered out again over the miniature valley that lay between the buttes. Not far away they could see muggy-looking water in a pothole, and nearby was a band of cattle grazing.

Jeff had learned that this was on the Cross Anchor Range, and was used only for winter range for some of the strong cattle. The presence of cattle here now could only mean that they were held for some unlawful purpose. In his eagerness to inspect the brands before it became dark he trotted on ahead of Lem Tooke and circled the cattle, who threw up their heads inquiringly, and then galloped lumberingly away.

Jeff put his tired horse to a run and quickly was running side by side with the cattle. One after another he looked at the brands and earmarks. Every animal was branded with the Pick and Ring brand on its left ribs, and furthermore every one

carried the Pickering earmark. And he looked in vain for signs that the brands had been tampered with.

Completely puzzled he spurred up and headed the bunch back with the object of looking them over again as they went toward Lem. He had just turned them when he heard a wild yell from the direction of the pothole. Looking up, he was astonished to see Lem Tooke digging rapidly back toward the pass, fairly dragging the pack horses along with him in his haste.

A moment later and the reason for Lem's hasty retreat was explained. Three horsemen were bearing down upon the cattle at full tilt from a grove of aspens that skirted one of the buttes, while two more were racing furiously toward the pass to head off Lem.

Tooke quickly abandoned the pack horses and whipped and spurred his mount viciously in a desperate attempt to reach the pass before his enemies.

Jeff had no time to bother about Lem's troubles. It was hopeless for him to think of reaching the pass, and he felt that it would be equally impossible for him to run away from pursuers on his tired horse, as they were probably mounted on fresh animals. It seemed a clear case of fight or surrender.

A bullet from a Winchester dropped in the dirt

ahead of him. It was almost a spent ball, but it told him clearly enough that he had no chance against men armed with rifles. He stopped his horse and waited for the men to come up, at the same time watching with interest the race toward the pass.

Lem's horse was fading badly. A few bullets began to whizz around him, and after one desperate effort to reach the end of the wash Lem also threw up his hands in token of surrender.

Two of the three men approaching Jeff were strangers to him, but the third was no other than Tub Pickering. The massive frame of the man was fairly quivering with anger.

"Git his guns first," Tub yelled at the two men who were slightly ahead of him.

"Don't be too sudden about doing anything," Jeff called coolly, as the men spread out to get on both sides of him. Then, for the first time, Tub Pickering seemed to recognize him.

"Well, by Gawd, them Hood people want cattle damn' bad when they send their high-toned managers out to rustle 'em!" Tub bellowed.

Jeff was sitting quietly in the saddle with both hands on the saddle horn, until one of the cowboys with Pickering reached out to relieve him of his gun. Then Jeff's hand clamped down over the

handle of the gun, and the cowboy only grasped a steel-like wrist and failed to twist it from the gun.

"Take your hands off me!" Jeff snapped curtly, and the astonished puncher abruptly let go.

"There's no occasion for any grandstand stuff, Pickering," Jeff went on evenly. "Evidently there's been some mistake. Your lead throwing may be excusable but I'm not going to stand for being man-handled."

The three men gaped at him in surprise. His cool defiance when they had him dead to rights was disconcerting. The punchers looked at their employer helplessly.

"What's the idee in stealin' my cattle?" Tub rumbled presently.

"I'm just as curious as you are to know what your stuff is doing here on our winter range," Jeff retorted.

"They was stole an' brung here, that's what!" Tub said ponderously. "Rustlers drove 'em off my range an' hid 'em up here. We trailed 'em an' have been waitin' fer the rustlers to put in an appearance. You come along here where nobody rides in the summer time, an' start gatherin' 'em up. Looks bad fer yuh, don't it?"

"What do you generally do with rustlers when you catch them?" Jeff inquired.

He had suddenly remembered the incoherent fear of his predecessors. Had they experienced something like this, he wondered? Was this a cleverly framed up affair to catch him redhanded in an apparent cattle theft, and use it to run him out of the country as the previous managers had been run out? He resolved then and there to see the thing through to a finish if it led to the penitentiary.

"There's been men hung fer less," Tub growled. "Jail terms don't seem to do 'em any good. I'm just wonderin' whether to string you up or let yuh go on yore promise to never show yore face here again."

It was working out as Jeff expected. "The last thing isn't worth considering," he retorted. "Go ahead with the hanging if you want, but be sure that you'll be indicted for murder if you try it. It's known that I came here today to look for stolen Cross Anchor cattle; it's also known that I haven't been in this country long enough to have brought these cattle here if I had wanted to. I don't think you'll try any hanging."

His calm defiance infuriated Pickering. "By Gawd, I've stood about enough from you Hood people!" he roared, shaking his fist in Jeff's face. "Every damn' one o' you white collared managers put up a howl that we're stealin' yore damn' cattle,

an' then yuh turn around an' steal mine. I caught you with the goods an' by Gawd I'm a-goin' to soak ye!"

"Why, you can't do a thing but rave," Jeff laughed. "You daren't try any hanging or anything like that if you wanted to. Everybody knows you've run the other managers out, and if anything happened to me you'd be arrested at once. But you don't want to hang me. Your game is to scare me out so you can have a free hand with your rustling. Well, I don't scare worth a damn."

"Pretty cute, you are," Tub sneered. "I ain't forgot how yuh tried to make me look silly by havin' that human scarecrow posin' as you. Take him back to camp, boys."

Jeff promptly wheeled his horse alongside Pickering's but kept his hand clamped on his gun. The punchers were alert for a chance to lift it, but having failed to accomplish it at the first they now feared to force matters again lest they be made to look foolish.

They had not proceeded far when they met the other two men coming back with the crestfallen and quaking Lem Tooke. With a word to Jeff's two guards Tub rode forward and talked with Lem's captors just beyond Jeff's hearing. Soon he began to question Lem Tooke, whom Jeff could see talking

earnestly, and with indubitable fear stamped upon his face.

At the end of ten minutes Tub rode back. "One of you fellows ride back an' git their pack horses," he directed.

He fell in alongside Jeff again. "I guess you was sincere enough in thinkin' yuh was after rustlers," he remarked in an entirely different tone of voice. "If yuh was yo're goin' to have a chance to see it through, 'cause yo're goin' to wait here with us till that damned old Childs comes along after these cattle."

Jeff suddenly found himself looking at Lem Tooke's round back with the utmost contempt. To save his skin Lem had told everything that had happened and, unless Pickering had caused the cattle to be planted there, everything indicated that Ezra Childs was helping to steal Pick and Ring cattle.

And now another theory began to take shape in Jeff's mind. That was that Pickering and Childs were stealing from each other and each one hoping to catch the other at it. Apparently Haines, Steed and Moore were playing fast and loose with both sides. But unless something was done Ezra Childs was destined to fall into Pickering's trap.

Jeff was out to get the rustlers, but a picture of

the distress of Mattie and Ray when their father was caught rose up to torment him.

Childs' crooked work must be stopped some way, he knew; but he determined to make a gigantic effort to see that it was not stopped by Tub Pickering.

CHAPTER VIII

A RELUCTANT PROMISE

A CASUAL spectator, chancing to meet the three men in cowboy attire jogging along through the hills that Saturday, would never have suspected from the demeanor of the one in the middle that he was virtually a prisoner of the others. To all appearances Bilious Burket was the life of the party. He joked and told funny stories with as much ease and sang-froid as he would have shown in a bunkhouse among friends.

For a long time his efforts were received with stony silence on the part of his auditors. They were grimly determined to show this lank individual that they were men of dignity who would tolerate no foolishness. But the constant bombardment of wise cracks and humorous comments began to wear away their resistance. They began to grin a little, then widely, and finally both broke into loud-mouthed guffaws when he began to imitate the bellowing of an obstreperous bull in a tone that was surprisingly like Tub Pickering's. It was not long after that until they were chatting quite amicably.

Bilious realized, however, that the men were no whit less determined to set him afoot at the head of Wagon Track Gorge. He began to brag about himself. As a rider and a roper he declared he was without a peer, and generously volunteered to show the boys some of the tricks of the trade. The punchers were rather proud of their own ability in that line and frankly skeptical of his ability to show them anything.

Down came three ropes, and one after the other they took their turns lassoing the helpless bushes along the way, and demonstrated their various favorite ways of getting their dallies on and off. To the huge enjoyment of the punchers Bilious seemed to be outclassed.

"If yuh'd give me a hoss that was as supple as a rheumatic elephant I'd show yuh some tricks," he said disparagingly. "When we stop fer lunch I'll show yuh some tricky ground ropin' that'll make yuh bug out yore eyes."

They laughed unbelievably. Bilious, they had about decided, was an amusing but harmless blow-hard.

They had covered perhaps fifteen or twenty miles when they stopped to have lunch. They turned their mounts loose with the saddles on to graze; and after they had eaten, Bilious gathered up his rope

and began to demonstrate his little bag of tricks. He could spin a noose awkwardly and jump through it occasionally, though more times he tripped and fell.

"Betcha I can spin the noose, jump through it, an' rope yore hoss as yuh run by," he said to one of the punchers.

"Wanta bet on it?" was the prompt reply.

"Got no money but it'd be a cinch if I did. Why, I could ketch both yore hosses as easy as one."

"Talk's cheap," he was jeered.

"Tell yuh what I will do," Bilious said. "Yuh plan on settin' me afoot with my saddle. Now the saddle won't be a damn' bit o' good tuh me without a hoss. I'll bet yuh my outfit ag'in one o' yore horses that I kin spin the rope, jump through it, an' ketch both yore hosses by the neck as yuh race by me abreast."

The punchers looked at each other covertly and exchanged winks. "Done!" they cried in a breath.

They caught their horses and mounted, and waited a few rods away for Bilious to get to twirling his rope. Bigger and bigger grew the whirling noose until almost the whole length of it was in one great circle.

"Come on," he yelled, and they rushed forward at full speed.

Bilious failed to jump the rope as he had promised, and the big noose shortened miraculously as he threw it. It settled neatly, not over the heads of the running horses, but around the bodies of the two men. Grimly Bilious dug in his heels and clung to the rope as the jerk came. The bodies of the punchers were jerked together with a bang, and this prevented them from righting themselves in the saddle while Bilious was being jerked ludicrously along in the wake of the horses. But each time he came down stifflegged, his boot heels boring into the ground, the punchers' arms pressed closer to their sides, and both were half hanging between the two running horses. Little by little they were pulled loose from their saddles, until suddenly the horses shot from under them and they hit the ground with a thump that knocked the breath out of both of them.

In a trice Bilious was upon them with a foot in the small of the topmost man's back. With a vast grunt he jerked the noose painfully tight about them, and made it secure with a half hitch. He hastened to remove their guns, and then stood back and contemplated his prisoners with a pleased grin.

"Funny I missed both them horses like that, wasn't it?" he inquired.

The men began to flounder around vigorously in a futile effort to separate.

"Tut, tut! You'll git yoreselves all dirty," Bilious reproved mildly. The punchers, though ready to almost explode with impotent rage, nevertheless subsided.

"Come now; let us reason together," Bilious said sociably. "Me, I'm a strong believer in this here reciprocity—hand other people the same thing they're tryin' tuh hand tuh you. That wink you boys passed a minute ago said yuh meant tuh take my saddle if I lost, an' give me the hoss laugh if I won. So far we're all agreed. Likewise, it bein' yore plan an' intention tuh make me walk home, pervidin' I had a home, it seems that the logical thing tuh do in the situation is fer me tuh invite yuh boys tuh do the same. I take it we're all unanimous?"

The men broke out in profane remonstrance, but Bilious checked them gently.

"It's a long ways home, an' there's nothin' so fatiguin' as a display of unnecessary temper. Just lie perfectly still till I gather up the horses."

He collected the three horses, uncinched the punchers' saddles, then put his own saddle on the best horse of the three, and turned the other two loose. He knew well enough that two men on foot

would never be able to catch loose cow horses on the open range.

"You boys'll be able tuh wriggle loose purty soon, an' if yuh don't git lost yuh can git home 'fore mornin'. Give my best regards tuh the folks, an' *adios, amigos!*"

He rode away, and a backward glance over his shoulder showed the two men throwing weird convulsions as they struggled to free themselves.

He had thrown their guns with their saddles just before riding away, but he had no fear of their being able to put them to any immediate use against him.

"Lemme see now," he soliloquized. "Here I am on a borrowed hoss which is likely tuh git me into a mess o' trouble should I advance tuh the rear an' meet some o' them hombres' friends. On the other hand if I'm still workin' fer this Singleton guy, an' I'm damned if I know whether I am or not, I'm sort of a free agent. An' still again I got friends on down here where I'll be a whole lot safer an' welcome."

His seamed, unhandsome face suddenly softened as the vision of a girl came into his mind. He had thought a lot of Marie Bullivant in his careless way, but it had never dawned upon him just how much until he realized that she had been brought to dis-

aster through his unwitting collusion with an unscrupulous villain.

He had tried to make amends by finding that man but he had failed. Now he felt an almost overpowering yearning to see the girl again. His own problems and troubles always rested lightly upon his shoulders. It was easy to forget the Cross Anchor and the Pick and Ring when thoughts of Marie filled his mind.

It was dusk when he reached the head of Wagon Track Gorge, the one negotiable route into the Dirty Devil country from that direction—a mere crack in the earth some fifteen miles long, which in places a mile or more at a stretch was not wide enough to let two wagons pass. On either side rose sheer, precipitous cliffs of painted rocks for hundreds of feet, up which no man might hope to climb. For this reason had the gorge received its name, and woe to the traveler who chanced to be caught in that gorge during one of the sudden, violent rainstorms which frequently swept the country above, and filled the gorge with a raging torrent of thick, yellow water.

It was precisely this fact which kept the people of the sparsely settled Dirty Devil country comparative strangers to the people of the upper tall grass plateaus. Yet for many of their supplies the

people in the Dirty Devil had to make the long trek out to Salina, or else take a rougher though shorter route to the desert town of Desolation, and run chances of the one store at that place not having what they wanted.

After a moment's deliberation Bilious headed down into the gorge. He could make it through in a matter of about three hours, then hive up under a bush somewhere to wait for morning, and ride on to old man Bullivant's for breakfast.

He proceeded according to program, and at nine o'clock the next morning he was at the place where Cabin Creek flowed into the larger, swifter Dirty Devil. Four or five miles up the creek was where the basin widened out, and there was the horse ranch bossed by Rube Fellows. An equal distance down the stream was old man Bullivant's shack on a sandy bar, where the old man raised fruit and vegetables which he sold to the few settlers and the fewer transients.

Bilious rode on down the river, and was surprised at the bad condition of the road; never good, it was now totally impassable for a vehicle. Great boulders, as large around as a wagon wheel lay in the road, and the sediment that had formed around them showed that many of them had lain there for months.

Bilious grew more and more sober, and something seemed to be constricting his throat as he got closer and closer to his destination. Then he rounded a bend of the river and saw what should have been the sandy bar. What he did see was a barren waste covered with huge boulders. A few logs jammed against the cliff was all that was left of old man Bullivant's cabin; a few scraggly, half-dead trees struggling through the rocks marked the pitiful remainder of the little orchard.

Bilious understood perfectly what had happened. One of those occasional cloudbursts had occurred in the right place in the canyon to wipe the old man out. On each side of the bar were perpendicular cliffs. There was not one chance in a million that the people living there could have escaped.

What a fool he had been, Bilious thought. Why had he not stayed here and taken care of Marie instead of starting out on a quest for vengeance? True enough she had been too broken-hearted to listen to him at the time, but she might have changed. He pictured the last moments of the girl and her grandfather as they were swept away to their deaths, and cursed hoarsely.

"Well," he said presently, "there's nothin' now tuh keep me from goin' back up there an' help Singleton find his rustlers."

But he had to have food, and he could not go back without visiting his old pals at the horse ranch.

"I'll hit it in time for dinner anyhow," he mused, but he had no appetite. The tragedy had struck too deeply. "Gawd, if I could only git my hands on that bird!" he mumbled.

The road up Cabin Creek was familiar, and when he reached the narrows and saw the basin flaring out on both sides, and the ranch building nestling between the creek and the point of a low ridge, he felt suddenly very lonesome. He hurried his horse a little and scanned the place for the sight of a familiar face.

There was not a man in sight, but when he stopped before a gate that led into the doorway a small, strange figure rose up from the grass to confront him—a sturdy little two-year-old in rompers.

"Who's you?" Bilious was challenged.

"Me? Why, I'm Nothin' from Nowhere," Bilious answered. "An' what's yore name?"

"Name's Bobby. My daddy's name's Rube."

"Well, I'll be—jiggered!" Bilious exploded. Then his face cracked in a wide grin. "Who'd ever thunk it—ole Rube Fellows married, when the rustle of a

skirt used tuh send him tuh the brush like a cow with a young calf!"

Bilious suddenly stooped and picked up the youngster in his arms. "Bobby, young feller, yuh shore used good judgment pickin' yoreself a dad," he said. "An' who's yore mammy?"

"Dere's my mama—comin' f'um de spring." The infant pointed a chubby finger toward the well-remembered path to the spring and Bilious saw the trim figure of a woman coming up to the house with a plate of butter in one hand and a bottle of cream in the other. She was dressed in a plain, neat gingham gown, and her face for the moment was obscured by a sunbonnet. She looked up and nearly dropped her burdens and Bilious came near letting the baby fall.

The woman was Marie Bullivant!

Bilious' head was swimming. Just when he had reckoned her dead he found her as the wife of his old boss and friend. Shifting Bobby over to one arm, he took his hat in his hand and advanced to meet her.

It was the same Marie he had known, yet greatly changed. She was thinner than she had been, and now her naturally dark face was marble white. There was a maturity about her strangely incongruous with the gay, reckless girl he had known be-

fore she went away with the man who called himself Arnold Bahr.

"Mama, dis is Misser Nuffin' fum Noplace—an' he likes my daddy," the urchin called cheerily.

A welcoming smile rippled over the girl's face. "Why, Bilious, I was never so glad to see anyone in my life," she said. Somehow she disposed of both butter and cream, and took his hand in both of hers. It was several minutes before Bilious could speak.

"I—I rode down tuh the old place, Marie, an' when I seen what was there, I thought—I thought——"

"We had abandoned the place before the cloudburst," she said. "Grandfather—had to be taken away. He lost his mind, you know. Rube was so kind. He brought me here to live with his mother when—when my baby was born."

Plainly the explanation was painful to her, but she went through it bravely.

"Then—then this boy ain't——"

Her fingers were pressed against his lips, and then she took Bobby from his arms. "Run in to Grandma, Bobby," she said.

"He calls Rube 'daddy,' and I don't want him ever to know who his real father was," she said.

"Of course," Bilious nodded.

"Bilious, when you left here they said you went after—Arnold. We never heard from you an' we—we were afraid——"

"I never found him," Bilious said dejectedly.

"I'm glad. Bilious, I wanted to tell you that I never blamed you for what happened. And if you ever should meet Arnold I want you to promise not to hurt him."

"That's a hard promise tuh make, Marie," he said bitterly. Almost it was upon his tongue to tell her how he had loved her, but he repressed it in time. She belonged to Rube Fellows now, and it was far better for her to think that he had gone after the fellow in simple revenge for the part he had been compelled to play.

"He is Bobby's father, Bilious," she said, as though that gave him a perfect license to live.

"Well, I've put in three years tryin' tuh find him without success; there's not much chance of me runnin' across him now," he said.

"But if you should, Bilious, I want your promise," she insisted.

"All right then, Marie; I'll promise never to harm him," he gave in reluctantly.

"And now come in and see Grandma Fellows," Marie said cordially. "She'll be tickled to death to see you, and so will Rube when he comes home."

CHAPTER IX

A HASTY DEPARTURE

THE white-haired old lady who had so long ruled as mistress of Cabin Creek basin had been a mother to the other men who worked there, as well as to her son. One of the favorites of her little flock had been Bilious Burket, though his eccentricity had always puzzled her. As she saw Marie showing a man into the sitting-room she stood up and peered at him nearsightedly, while Marie stood smilingly by waiting for results.

Bilious could see that Marie was hoping for an exhibition of his usual clownishness, and he hated to disappoint her though he was in anything but a mood for such display.

"Madam, I'm an agent fer an electric curlin' iron company, an' I'm sure yuh'll be interested in the same. If yuh'll just lemme demonstrate——"

"Why, the idee!" Grandma Fellows broke in. "Do yuh think I'd go in for folderols like that at my age? An' besides, where'd yuh git 'lectricity to run your contraption, down here?"

She had raised her glasses to get a better look at

this foolish agent and suddenly she recognized him. "You—you—Bilious Burket—come here till I shake yuh!" she laughed. She pulled his face down and kissed him and he saw tears in her eyes.

"Mighta knowed it was you—nobody else would think of such a fool thing," she charged. "But I'd buy a whole dozen 'lectric curlers to have yuh back here again, yuh rascal!"

"Yuh don't know how good it feels tuh be back again, Grandma," he said, and for the instant it was the truth. Despite his waywardness there were people who cared for him, and it was soul warming.

"I wish Rube was here. He's said often an' often how much he wished yuh was back; ain't he Marie?"

"Oh, yes. Rube says you were the best man he ever had here, an' besides, you were his friend," Marie said. "Won't he be surprised and pleased when he gets back?"

"Daddy's go fetch me a wockin' horse f'um town, ain't he, Mama?" Bobby asked his mother eagerly.

"Yes, honey, Daddy's going to bring you lots of things," Marie said tenderly. "He's a wonderful big man, isn't he?"

Bilious could see Grandma Fellows fairly swell with motherly pride, and he damned himself as a traitor, a hypocrite and a false friend, because

when he looked at Marie he realized that he was still madly in love with her.

"Ain't Rube here?" he managed to ask.

"No, he's gone out to Salina with two of the boys for supplies," Rube's mother answered. "They left three days ago an' took three big freight wagons. You know what that means, Bilious."

"It means a danged hard week's trip," Bilious admitted. "But I'll shore git tuh see him on my way out."

"What?" the women asked in unison.

"Yuh don't mean to say that you're goin' away—again?" Grandma Fellows demanded.

"Yep, I gotta do it," Bilious said. "I got me a job up here on the plateau, an' I just sneaked away, so tuh speak, tuh make a flyin' visit down here."

"Well, I never!" Grandma Fellows expostulated. "You punchers are all the same—never a thought for the people who care for yuh. Yuh go away fer years without ever writin' a word, an' then yuh come within a hundred miles o' home an' git yuh a job, when yuh'd just as well have one here, an' when yuh got time yuh make us a flyin' visit!"

Bilious could only hang his head.

"They're not all that way, Grandma—Rube is dependable," Marie comforted.

"I hadn't ought to talked that way, Bilious," the

old lady apologized. "You're yore own man an' got a right to do what yuh please. But somehow I git to thinkin' that yo're almost as much my own boy as Rube."

Tears blinded the tall puncher's eyes. All this love was his, but he had to flee lest he betray it.

"I'm darn sorry, Gran'ma, an' I'll git down here tuh see yuh whenever I can, an' I'll shore look for Rube as I go out," he said somewhat lamely.

A constrained silence came upon them. "The boys'll be in any minute, and I must have dinner ready," Marie stated, and went out.

"Dere dey come!" Bobby yelled, and with a word of excuse Bilious followed the youngster outside to greet the boys he had once ridden with.

They greeted him hilariously, but the clasp of their muscular fingers told him that every one was unfeignedly glad to see him. They badgered him good-naturedly about his evident lack of prosperity; then asked for an account of himself, and finally protested volubly against his departure when he told them he had a job with the Cross Anchor.

"That outfit's the bunk," declared Harp Draper. "So's that Pick an' Ring gang."

"Know much about 'em?" Bilious asked eagerly.

"Not much except their general reputation. Only time we come in contact with 'em is occasionally on

Desolation Desert in the winter time. Both outfits kinda pertend like they thought we was stealin' from 'em."

"Yuh ain't never noticed any of their cattle bein' drove down the Dirty Devil?" Bilious queried.

"Nix. Some o' their riders has been seen down here, but none o' their cattle that I ever heard of," Harp said.

Bilious filed that away in his brain for future reference, and the topic of conversation changed. They asked him how long he intended to stay, and there was a roar of protest when he announced his intention of leaving the next morning. They would not hear of it, and announced that they would use violence if necessary to detain him. In the end he had to yield and promise to stay over another twenty-four hours.

During his visit he avoided Marie as much as he could. In fact it was only at meal-time that he had to face her, and this he got over with as quickly as possible. Often he found her eyes upon him inquiringly, but he ducked his head to avoid glancing in her direction. He felt that she was somehow disappointed in him. Whenever her name was mentioned he quickly changed the subject or cracked a joke. By their talk he judged that every man on the ranch was in love with her, and they all made a pet of her boy. He was glad of it, but he was

sure that none of them felt toward her as he did, else they could not have stayed.

He was more than glad when Tuesday morning rolled around, though it exiled him from his friends, and sent him to a place where he knew he would be in positive danger. After breakfast he caught his horse and was exchanging final farewells with the boys when he felt Bobby pulling at his leg.

"My mama wan' talk wiv you in de kin—kin—kinchen," the little boy got out.

Reluctantly Bilious took Bobby by the hand and started toward the house.

"Here, Bobby, I wanna show yuh the new pigs," Harp Draper said with a grin, and Bobby abandoned Bilious at once.

Bilious found Marie in the kitchen, and to his increasing alarm Grandma Fellows was not present.

"You wasn't going away without bidding me goodby, Bilious," she said softly.

"No-o, Marie. Goo'by." He extended his hand bashfully, and the girl ignored it.

"You used to think a lot of me, Bilious," she said wistfully. "You don't hate me for what I've done?"

"Hate yuh? No. I—I'm dang glad yuh done what yuh did done—do."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "I'm not. Oh, Bilious, you don't know how I've regretted all that. I—I'd have killed myself, I think, if it hadn't been

for the folks here. They've all been so good; especially Rube and his mother; they've acted exactly as though nothing had happened. But—but I know how people look at such things. And, Bilious, I don't want you—to think—that I'm——"

"Lord, girl," Bilious burst out earnestly, "I'm the last man on earth tuh think that—an' I'll kill the man who does. Why, I—I——"

"What, Bilious?"

"Dang it, I love yuh," he blurted.

"Bilious!" she said gently.

He tried to resist, but he could not look away from her pleading eyes. Her warm, red lips were raised to his, and the perfume of her hair drove him to the verge of imbecility. He caught her to him and crushed her lips with his.

For a moment his whole frame vibrated with an intoxication of joy. She pushed him gently back with her hand, her soft, brown eyes looked into his with yearning.

"I'm married, Bilious," she said bravely, "but I can get a divorce, and then——"

"My Gawd, no—not that!" he exclaimed hoarsely, and breaking away from her fled out to his horse, and fairly flung himself into the saddle.

"Goodby everybody," he croaked to the amazed circle of men, and jabbed his horse with the spurs.

CHAPTER X

AN OVERLOOKED GUN

THOUGH grimly determined to escape in time to keep Ezra Childs from falling into the trap that had been set for him, Jeff was careful not to let his intention be suspected.

At Pickering's well concealed camp he dismounted from his horse and unsaddled with the utmost carelessness, and later turned his attention to relieving his pack horses of their burden. This was more than Lem Tooke was able to do, for that aspiring puncher was now stricken dumb.

"If there's anything that you need that I've got you're welcome to it," Jeff said hospitably to Pickering.

"We ain't got no salt," Tub growled.

"We've got plenty." Jeff dug around until he found the salt, and by that time some of the men had a fire started and supper was cooking. Two of the men had taken the horses away, evidently to water, and the fifth man kept a furtive eye on the visitors.

Tub Pickering had seated himself on a bed roll, and Jeff dropped down beside him.

"How long do you figure we'll have to wait for the rustlers?" Jeff asked.

"How should I know?" Tub grunted.

"You know this kind of gets me—this about Childs I mean. I had no idea——"

"I could have told yuh. But you birds that come out here know too damn' much."

"I'm willing to learn," Jeff said.

"Tooke says he told yuh," Tub said sourly.

"But I never thought about it being your cattle. I merely thought Tooke had misunderstood, and I wanted to make sure what it was all about."

"You will," Tub said pointedly.

Supper was eaten by the flickering light of the camp fire, and immediately afterward the men crawled into their blankets. No one, apparently, had any fear of the rustlers coming in the night.

The Pick and Ring men contrived to make their beds on both sides of Jeff and Lem Tooke; an act which Jeff pretended to ignore. Outwardly they were not prisoners, and he was not saying anything to jeopardize his standing. It was plain that Pickering had little fear of their attempting to escape, and the precautionary measures were rather such as they would adopt against any potential enemies.

Jeff waited a considerable time before he dared to move. The men all seemed to be asleep, judging by their breathing, and he cautiously raised his head. Up from his blankets like a squirrel popping from his hole came the tousled mane of Lem Tooke.

Jeff dropped back instantly, and so did Lem. A few minutes later Jeff raised up again, and so did Lem. Jeff dropped back and swore softly. He could not have Tooke blundering along after him, and he knew to a certainty that if he left the camp Tooke would try to follow—and rouse the camp.

He waited again for what seemed hours, and he was growing very sleepy himself. He raised himself cautiously and drew on one of his laced boots. He reached for the other one, and saw Lem Tooke likewise reaching for his boots.

Jeff gestured emphatically with both hands for Tooke to stay in bed, but the fellow could not take a hint. Jeff raised his other boot as though to hurl it at the fellow's head, but Lem only gave a wan smile and continued to puff and tussle with his tight boots.

Jeff pantomimed viciously, and suddenly Tub Pickering sat up with a snort. Jeff ducked into his blankets, but he was sure that he had been seen, and it was certain that the ponderous movements of Tooke were observed.

"What you birds up to?" Pickering rasped.

"Just drawing some clothes on," Jeff replied quickly. "It's cold up here. Guess we didn't bring enough blankets."

"Huh!" Tub snorted skeptically. "I'll fix that. We'll have somebody take turns stayin' up an' keepin' a fire." He began to crawl out himself.

"I'm not sleepy—I'll do it," Jeff offered.

"Yuh'll stay right there in bed," Pickering said heavily, and as the huge frame of the cattleman loomed directly over him Jeff decided that it would be the part of wisdom to obey. He turned over on his side and went to sleep, and the changing of the fire guard at intervals throughout the night scarcely caused a ripple in his slumbers.

There was no use bucking the unbeatable, he thought wisely, but he vowed vengeance upon Lem Tooke if they ever did get out of the mess they were in.

Jeff was the last man up in the morning. He washed and then ate a hearty breakfast, and attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to carry on a trivial conversation with Pickering. Tub was now openly suspicious of Jeff's intentions, and made no secret of it.

Though the sun was not up, and it was still chilly, the fire was put out, the horses collected and

saddled. One man, called Pliny, was despatched on foot up the butte to watch the trails.

Tub Pickering enjoined silence, though there was no particular reason for it. Again and again Jeff saw Tub or some of his men casting longing glances toward his gun. More than once he knew some of them passed behind him with the intention of lifting it if the chance offered. He was careful to see that the only way they could get it was to take it by force, and until an emergency arose they did not care to risk their lives, or at least to precipitate an open break.

Most of the forenoon the cattle were out on the floor of the small valley, but they were gradually working around the end of the southern butte.

"You, Leger an' Cavanaugh, git around them damn' cattle an' shoo 'em back toward the water-hole," Tub ordered irritably.

The men rode away, and Jeff tensed himself for action. Only one man remained with Tub Pickering. If Lem Tooke could have been depended upon the count was even. But Lem would have to be counted out.

Jeff started over to where the remaining horses were tied.

"Where yuh goin'?" Tub snapped.

"Going home," Jeff retorted curtly.

"Not yet yuh ain't," Tub rasped. "Yuh butted in here, young feller, an' yuh'll stay till the game is through." His hand dropped down heavily to the handle of the gun at his hip. His man, Bill Murphy, did the same.

"I don't want trouble with you, Pickering, but all this is absurd," Jeff said, "These cattle of yours probably drifted in here themselves."

"Ed Haines brought 'em here—yuh can bet on that," Lem Tooke piped up.

Jeff strode angrily back toward Tooke. "Say, you damned sheep, you've caused trouble enough putting in your oar at the wrong time, and I've a notion to——"

In rushing toward Tooke, Jeff got himself out from between Tub and Murphy. Murphy was grinning in anticipation of seeing a fight, and even Tub Pickering permitted a smile to open his mouth.

Then Jeff whirled abruptly, and the amazed men saw the muzzle of a .45 revolving slowly from Tub to Murphy.

"Take your hands off those guns," Jeff snapped, and the order was obeyed. "Go get them," he ordered Lem Tooke, and the fellow advanced fearfully and took the guns.

"I'll fix you fer this, Tooke," Bill Murphy threatened.

"I—I'm doin' it under pressure," Tooke croaked.

"I didn't want to have trouble, Pickering, but I simply can't stand for this child's play," Jeff declared. "I don't know what Childs may have done, but I'll say this: I don't think it's half as much as you've done to him. So back off and stay there till we get away."

Lem Tooke stood with the two guns in his hands until Jeff ordered him to dispose of them some way, and change the two men's rifles to their own saddles. There was no time, of course, to bother with the pack horses.

When Lem had changed the rifles Jeff had him pick up the six-guns again, and also Lem's own gun, which had been taken from him. Then they mounted.

"We'll send these shooting-irons back to you first time we get a chance," Jeff grinned at the quivering Pickering.

"Don't drop any of those," he warned Lem, "or we'll be leaving here faster than we want to. But ride!"

Until they were out of revolver range Jeff rode at a trot, looking backward at the two men. Then he dropped his gun back in the holster, and put his horse into a keen run.

"We've got to get through that pass before that

fellow Pliny heads us off," he told Lem Tooke, and the other needed no more encouragement.

A moment later there came the crack of a rifle, and a bullet sped by uncomfortably close to Jeff's head.

He gave a startled glance around and saw Tub Pickering pumping in another shell.

"Thought I told you to bring *all* the guns?" Jeff snapped at Tooke.

"I brung what yuh told me," Lem called back. "That rifle belongs t' the man up on the butte. He left it."

"Well, thank God, he ain't got it with him," Jeff breathed. "This shooting will give him time to head us off if he wants to."

Tub Pickering was emptying the rifle steadily, and one bullet creased a hip of Lem's horse. The animal stuck down its head and began to buck. At the first jump Lem went into the air and struck the ground like a sack of salt, while guns seemed to shower all about him.

The fellow lay still, though Jeff was convinced that he was not in the least hurt, and was equally convinced that he had fallen off on purpose. Lem, in fact, was taking the safest possible means to surrender.

Jeff paused a moment, and saw Pickering and

Murphy running to their horses. He had no time to bother with Lem Tooke or to pick up the guns. He was in plain sight from the top of the butte where Pliny was, and his one chance seemed to be to win through before the man could possibly head him off.

He rode on desperately for the narrow pass, but before he reached it he saw Pliny plunge down the side of the butte and entrench himself in the wash. To ride on in the open and up to a concealed man with a gun, even though that gun was a six-shooter, was obviously suicidal. But back of him Pickering and Murphy had stopped where Tooke had fallen and thoroughly armed themselves.

Abruptly Jeff changed his course and raced along the foot of the north butte, vainly looking for a trail over it. This butte veered around to the east, so that Jeff was obliged to skirt the little valley, thus letting Tub and Murphy gain some ground by having the inside track. Then he saw his two remaining foes coming along the foot of the third butte to head him off. Attracted by the firing they had abandoned the cattle and taken a hand in the chase.

Jeff was first at the low place between the north and east buttes, but there was no trail here as there was between the other buttes. In fact all he could

see was a dense thicket of oak brush bordering a jumbled mass of rocks over which a horse could not possibly climb.

"*Wham!*" a bullet from Tub Pickering's rifle smashed into a swell shrub just above Jeff's head.

"*Wham! Wham!*" Leger and Cavanaugh were driving bullets into the ground ahead of him.

Jeff had surrendered once, and he knew better than to try it again. On the other hand his enemies were closing in on him.

There was no place where he could force his horse through the thick oak brush, so he dismounted, jerked the rifle from the scabbard under the stirrup leather and dived into the thicket on foot.

It was hard going. The unyielding branches clawed and tore at his clothing and scratched his flesh. Bullets were now being sent into the thicket in good earnest from four rifles in the hands of capable shots. His foes, of course, could not see him, and by the time they had reached his horse he was deep enough in the thicket to be able to move cautiously and avoid making noise enough to betray his location. He dropped flat on the ground to rest and to listen if he could.

"He can't be fur in there," he heard somebody say. "We'd orta be able t' drag him out."

"Like hell—just like huntin' a black horse in the dark," said another.

"We kin just about shoot him outa there, anyway," said another. "Put yoreself in his place. Would yuh stay in there long after five men begun tuh rake hell outa yuh with hot lead?"

"If I was so scared as that bird prob'ly is I'd likely stay right thar an' pray an' shiver," was the retort.

Jeff, peering through the bushes, caught sight of a man's dingy white hat bobbing up and down as the man talked. He poked the rifle out in front of him, and drew a careful bead at the top of the hat, secretly hoping that the man under it was the fellow who had made the reflection upon his courage.

He pulled trigger and was rewarded with a wild yell of astonishment.

"Wow! Git tuh hell back—he kin see out a damn' sight better than we kin in!" somebody yelled.

"He can't git away—an' thirst'll drive him out. Git back a ways an' wait fer him," ordered a voice that Jeff recognized as Tub Pickering's.

He realized that his position was perilous. Hunger and thirst would surely drive him out in the end if they continued the siege. He doubted, how-

ever, that they would do that. They were waiting for the arrival of Ez Childs, and here they were in plain view of the pass through which Childs must surely come.

CHAPTER XI

A CHILL AWAKENING

HALF an hour or so after Jeff Singleton had left the Cross Anchor ranch in company with Lem Tooke, Ray Childs sought his sister in the kitchen.

"Well," Mattie said, "what have you lost?"

"Me? Nothin'." The boy began to fidget. "Say, Matt, where d'ye s'pose that goggle-eyed Lem Tooke is takin' the new supe?"

"I don't know. Why? I suppose Lem is just showing him the ranch."

"Show nothin'. I seen Tooke sidlin' up to Jeff this mornin'——"

"Mr. Singleton, Ray. Don't be so familiar," his sister cut in reprovingly.

"Well, he told me to call him Jeff an' I'm a goin' to," the boy declared firmly. "I like him. That's why I don't want tuh see that walkin' pot o' beans a-leadin' him into trouble."

"What possible trouble could Lem get him into?"

"I dunno. Still, listen, Mat; there's somethin' shady goin' on here, an'—an' dad's in it somehow."

"Ray, have you been finding out things?" Mattie asked earnestly.

"I ain't been asleep all the time. Dad hates old Tub Pickering, don't he?"

"Yes, he does," Mattie admitted. "He thinks it was Pickering's fault that Henry Clarke lost his ranch. Dad and Henry were more like brothers than boss and man. The foreclosure was the real cause of Henry's death, dad thinks."

"An' I reckon he's right," Ray asserted.

"No. It was Henry Clarke's bad management on the desert the winter they lost so many cattle, that broke him."

"Where'd yuh git all that?" Ray demanded scornfully. "From Gus Pickering, huh?"

"Yes. If dad would only listen to reason!"

"Dad don't object to Gus comin' tuh see you, does he?"

"No; why should he?"

"He's a Pickering, ain't he?"

"But Dad knows that Gus wants peace, and don't approve of what his father does."

"You listen to me; Gus is as crooked as the rest of 'em—mebbe more so. He pals around with Ed Haines an' his gang, an' I tell yuh they ain't on the level," Ray insisted.

"I agree with you," Mattie said.

"If yuh wasn't so stuck on Gus I could tell yuh——"

"I'm not stuck on Gus. He's trying to establish peace between these two ranches, and I'm trying to help him."

"Who d'ye s'pose scared out these other managers before Jeff?" the boy asked abruptly.

"How should I know?" Mattie demanded. "I think it was the rustlers."

"Yeah? Yore bright friend Gus had a hand in it," Ray shot out.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I heard him an' Montasano Steed chucklin' over what they done to Welch, the last man," the boy said.

"Are you sure?" Mattie took the boy by the shoulders and looked straight into his eyes.

"I know it. If I'd climbed into the grain box sooner I'd have knew how they done it," Ray maintained. "An' I'm afraid," he went on, "that Jeff is a-ridin' into the same thing today."

"Ray! What makes you think that?" Mattie cried anxiously.

"'Cause I know Lem Tooke has been foolin' around tryin' tuh watch Haines an' Steed. He's a-scared of 'em, but that don't keep him from bein' a spy. He got a hold o' somethin' last night. I

don't know what it was, but it had Jeff all excited. When they was saddlin' up I went over, an' I heard Jeff mention Cardinal Buttes."

"Cardinal Buttes! Why—why there are no cattle there. That's our winter range," Mattie exclaimed.

"No cattle there, but it might be tough goin' for Jeff if that blunder-headed Lem Tooke guided him over there an' they found—somebody waitin' for 'em."

The girl's face turned pale, and Ray put a clincher to his argument. "That first night Jeff had a run-in with Ed Haines. Ed was goin' tuh lick Lem Tooke, an' Jeff broke his hold an' stood him off. Nobody ever bluffed Ed before, an' he'll git even if he can."

"It's too bad. I don't see why the Hood people wanted to send a mere boy like him down here anyway—after they knew what had happened to the others. It—it's almost murder."

"Jeff ain't so easy," Ray defended his new friend. "Lookit the way he rode Warbonnet the other day. If it had been me with him instead o' that piece o' boloney now——"

"Are you sure they went that way?" Mattie asked. "I thought I saw them going in the other direction."

"Trust Tooky-Took for that. I betcha I could cut across the hills right now an' see 'em veer back toward the Cardinals."

"You do that," Mattie said impulsively. "Don't let them see you, but if they are going that way come back and tell me."

It was noon before Ray returned, and signified to Mattie by signs that his guess had been confirmed. Their father was present, and it was impossible to talk before him.

Ezra Childs was absent-minded and moody.

"Matt," he said suddenly, "take the car an' drive over to the Pick an' Ring. I want to know if that detective that come here with Singleton is over there."

"Detective? Was that man a detective?" Mattie inquired.

"Sure he was. He's the man we got t' wa—" He caught himself up quickly. "He's the man the company sent down here t' run things—I'm dead sure of that. This Singleton is a figgerhead. Homer Graves is too smart a man to send a young buck like him down here to run a property of this kind. But that gag they pulled comin' in here was too thin. Anybody could see through it."

"It's too bad," Mattie said regretfully. "Dad, aren't you afraid he'll be hurt? He's so inexpe-

rienced, and you know what happened to the others."

"None of 'em died, did they?" Childs snapped.

Mattie had no opportunity to talk to her brother alone until after her return from the Pick and Ring. She had seen neither Tub nor Gus Pickering, and the people she did meet assured her that Bilious was not there, and had better not return.

"Didn't yuh notice that sign on the gate?" she was asked.

"I did notice that it had been changed," she smiled.

"He did it. An' if Tub ever gits his hands on him again! He set two of the boys afoot way out on the range when they was supposed to be showin' him the way out, an' rode off on one o' their horses," her informant said.

Mattie laughed, though this fresh proof of the green-looking stranger's prowess added to her conviction that her father was right.

"Ray," she said to her brother that night, "if Mr. Singleton isn't here in the morning we must ride over to Cardinal Buttes and find out what has happened to him."

"Bet yore life," Ray said, "an' I'm goin' tuh take my rifle."

They had little difficulty getting away the next

morning. Ray had his rifle, and Mattie had an ample supply of lunch to do them the entire day. Both were mounted on good horses. Ray was inclined to be talkative, but he found little response from his sister.

For a long time the girl had been worried. She had sensed that her father was in trouble—trouble that might easily involve the rest of his family—and she knew that somehow it was bound up with the mysterious terror that scared away every manager sent out by the company. She could not believe that her father had a hand in that, and yet she knew he had taken no active steps to prevent it. She sensed that he would not turn over his hand to save Jeff Singleton from meeting the same fate that had overtaken his predecessors. In a vague way she realized that it would be protection for her father as well as for Jeff if she could save the young manager.

The Cardinal Buttes at last loomed before them, and they unconsciously urged their horses a little faster. Suddenly they heard a distant boom sound and stopped their horses.

"Was that a rifle?" Mattie asked.

"There ain't no thunderstorm close around; it musta been," Ray said. He began to draw his rifle from the scabbard.

"You leave that be," Mattie commanded, and they rode on.

Presently they heard the same sound again, and this time they knew it was a rifle; and it was followed by other reports, though not all of them carried exactly the same sound.

"It's around the north butte, an' I reckon somebody must be shootin' at somebody else," Ray hazarded.

"They may be hunting," Mattie offered, but with no degree of conviction.

Their nervousness increased as they entered the pass, but they kept on going until they had passed through. The firing had ceased for some time, and they could see nobody. Ray's keen eyes, however, quickly sighted the bunch of cattle that was now drawing back to water.

"Cattle don't belong here now," he said. "Matt, there's somethin' queer about this. We'd better lockit them cattle."

They pressed on, and suddenly they heard a rifle again off to their left. They could see nothing, but the sound seemed to come from the rocky wilderness between the two buttes to the north. Again and again the rifle was fired, and they became more and more perplexed.

"Ray, it is somebody who is hurt over there,

and he is signalling for help," Mattie declared suddenly. "We must ride over there."

"But there was somebody else shootin' a while ago," the boy objected.

Nevertheless they turned their horses in that direction and had ridden half the distance when they saw a man on foot tumble out of the oak brush thicket at the foot of the butte, and signal frantically for them to go back.

"It—it is Mr. Singleton, I do believe!" Mattie exclaimed. "But why——"

"Hey, lookit!" her brother exclaimed, and following his pointing finger she saw five men riding toward them from the other side of the pass.

"He—this man—wants us to get back to the pass before they head us off," Mattie said. But the young people could not make up their minds what to do. They had come to rescue Jeff Singleton, and if this was Jeff, as they believed, he appeared to need rescuing. They hesitated too long, and could not have made the pass if they wanted to.

They rode on toward the man by the brush, who was now reversing his signals and frantically urging them to hurry.

"It's Jeff all right, an' he's been in a fight!" Ray whooped joyfully.

Jeff, with his clothes torn to rags; his hands and

face scratched by bushes and smeared with blood, and with a smoking rifle in his hand certainly did look as though he had been in a fight.

"Mattie! My God, what are you doing here?" he demanded. "And Ray?"

"Oh, yuh did see me at last, did yuh?" Ray asked, grinning ironically.

"What's all the trouble?" the girl demanded.

"Where is your father?" Jeff asked.

"He's home. Why?"

"Did he send you?"

"No. We were afraid you'd be in trouble, and we——"

"Yuh mighta knowed better than tuh go off with that flop-eared Lem Tooke," Ray charged.

"I do now," Jeff said grimly. "But look here, that is Tub Pickering coming, and he's on the warpath. Those are his cattle out there, and he thinks your father stole them. He's been waiting here for someone to come after them."

"And did you think we were my father, and somebody?" Mattie asked.

"For a minute, yes."

"You've been havin' a fight with 'em, ain't yuh Jeff?" Ray asked delightedly.

"You might call it a quarrel," Jeff grinned.

Mattie's eyes were shining. Despite the fact that

he was in a bad way himself he had tried to send them out of danger; believing that it was their father and one of the men. Then another thought cooled the ardor of her eyes. He had thought her father a rustler!

"They'll be here in a minute, Jeff. What're we goin' tuh do?" Ray inquired, at the same time reaching for his rifle.

"I can't think they'll dare to hurt you, and I can't stay in the brush and rocks there indefinitely. In fact I'm mighty dry right now. I guess we'll wait for 'em, and see how they act," Jeff said.

"You leave them to me," Mattie said.

"Yuh musta licked 'em, Jeff," Ray surmised.

"No, they ran me in here. Of course I could hold 'em off till I had to come out. One of them was watching the pass and when he saw you coming he signaled the others, and they rode back to get out of sight. Otherwise, they'd still be out there pumping lead into this thicket," Jeff explained.

Tub Pickering was no less surprised than Jeff to see who it was, and he relieved his feelings by a heartfelt oath.

"What'n hell are you kids doin' here?" he thundered. "Can't them damn' Hood people do their own rustlin' without havin' a pair o' kids do it for 'em?"

"Mr. Pickering, you are foolish to think there is any rustling being done," Mattie said.

"Hell, there they are. Them's my cattle," Tub boomed, indicating the little herd.

"We came out here because we learned that those cattle had been planted here for the purpose of getting Mr. Singleton into trouble," Mattie said.

"Who done it then?" Tub demanded.

"I can't say, but I think likely whoever it was played the game intended to fool you and Mr. Singleton both."

"Well, Singleton ain't done with this yet," Tub rasped. "I ain't in the habit o' lettin' any man make me stick my hands up an' git away with it."

"Hear that, Matt? Jeff held 'em up," Ray chortled.

His sister scowled at the irrepressible youth, but his hasty remark had not helped Jeff's cause.

"Git his guns," Tub ordered. "Take 'em this time if yuh have t' bat him over the head."

"You seem to be in command of the situation, and the rifle is yours anyway," Jeff said smilingly, and gave up the weapons.

"I'm takin' you back with me, and after I show yuh a few things I'm bettin' yuh won't be half as cocky as yuh have been," Tub declared with a sinister smile.

"You had better be careful, Mr. Pickering," Mattie admonished. "If anything happens to Mr. Singleton I'll see that you answer for it."

"Yo're a gal, an' my boy's sweet on yuh, but keep out o' this fer yore own good," Tub said angrily.

"Yes, stay out of it, please. I'll take care of myself," Jeff urged.

"We'll go back t' camp an' git somethin' t' eat," Tub said, and offered his stirrup for Jeff to get on behind.

Savage old rangeman that he was, possibly outlaw and all—Jeff still had a sort of unwilling admiration for Pickering. He was accustomed to club men into submission to his will, but Jeff decided that he would be open and aboveboard in his operations.

Returning to camp they found Lem Tooke missing. Beyond a doubt he had taken the first opportunity to escape.

"An' he's took a hell of a lot o' grub with him, too," Bill Murphy said peevishly. "We'd orta killed him while we had him."

Jeff wasted no sympathy upon Tooke, but he was worried about Mattie and Ray. It was getting late in the day, and their absence from home might cause trouble there. Nor was he certain that they

were safe with the Pickering men if anything unexpected came up.

"Don't you worry," Mattie said to him. "I'm not going without you."

"But you must," he insisted. "You must start back right away."

"There ain't no use o' waitin' here any longer," Tub spoke up. "The rustlers won't come now. Leger, you an' Cavanaugh take these cattle back on our range, an' the rest of us will start for home."

"Does Mr. Singleton go with us?" Mattie demanded evenly.

"He don't. He goes with me," Tub said firmly.

"It's exactly what I want to do," Jeff said cryptically.

After they had eaten they all started toward the pass with the exception of the two men left behind to bring the cattle. But when they reached the place where Mattie and Ray should have turned off they flatly refused unless Jeff was permitted to go with them.

Neither Tub's threats nor Jeff's entreaties could sway them, and Tub was too stubborn to yield.

"We'll have t' camp out tonight," Tub said angrily. "Want t' spend the night with a lot o' men?"

"Pickering, you're a damned cur," Jeff shot out hotly.

"Shut up, you," Tub snarled, and cuffed the younger man across the face with the flat of his hand.

Jeff attempted to spring to the ground, but felt Murphy's gun poking in his ribs. "Yuh've had yore day, bo," Murphy grinned.

"Don't, Jeff. I'm not afraid," Mattie said.

Darkness overtook them before they reached water and they had to ride an hour or so in the dark to reach a small creek. Mattie and Ray were calmly ignored, except that they were given food, and after supper, blankets. Jeff did not know where the young people slept; all he knew was that he was circled about by Tub and his two men.

He was awakened in the middle of the night by something cold pressed against his forehead, which he instinctively knew to be a gun. For a moment he felt dizzily sick inside; thinking that he was about to be murdered.

"Git up an' come with us, an' make no noise," he was ordered.

The trick on foot was obviously to move on while Mattie and Ray were still asleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERIOUS HORROR

JEFF walked forward steadily enough. There was no use to awaken and frighten the boy and girl who had stuck with him so courageously, for they could do nothing. Nor was it advisable to show fear or weakness now. However, he felt by no means blithe about it. They might be going to kill him—he considered that only a bare possibility—they might be going to whip him, or they might merely intend to scare him out of the country.

Moving forward so silently there in the darkness, with masses of strangely shaped clouds poised with an air of curious expectancy overhead, the whole thing assumed a sinister import; and Jeff, with a naturally vivid imagination, had a hard time to keep rigid control of his nerves.

The horses had been tied up nearly a quarter of a mile from the camp, so that the inevitable noise of mounting would not disturb the young people they wished to leave behind.

“So yuh’re firmly convinced that I’m stealin’

cattle from the Cross Anchor, huh?" Tub asked sardonically when they were mounted.

"That's right," Jeff replied calmly enough.

"Yuh think, too, that it was me who scared out them other superintendents, huh?"

"I'm quite sure of it, but if you think you can scare me——"

"Wait till yuh see what scared them an' yuh can tell better," Tub Pickering cut in grimly.

No more was said on the strange night ride. That he had to face some terrific ordeal Jeff was certain, and he tried to steel himself for anything in advance. The north star told him that they were bearing in the general direction of the Cross Anchor range, but they were getting into a rougher country than he had thought existed up here; or else the eerie shadows of the night made it seem worse than it was.

Once they seemed uncertain of the trail and stopped to confer.

"Say, was that a horse I heard?" Pliny demanded. "Damned if I don't think them fool kids are fol-lerin'."

They listened intently, but could hear no more sounds and decided that Pliny had been mistaken.

The clouds were beginning to scatter and a peculiar grayness in the east presaged the approach

of dawn, when they stopped in the bottom of a narrow canyon, so deep that only a thin streak of sky could be seen at the top.

"This is the canyon all right," Tub said.

"An' the cabin is right up above," Pliny chimed in.

"No, below," Tub insisted.

They proceeded to argue, and Jeff learned that the cabin they sought was certainly not familiar to them. Bill Murphy, it appeared, had never seen it. Pliny had been there twice, and Tub once. This seemed rather strange to Jeff, who could only wonder what it was all about.

In the end Tub had his way and they traveled a mile down the canyon, to where it ended against an upstanding pinnacle of almost solid rock, from which other canyons twisted away like spokes from the hub of a wagon wheel.

"I'm wrong," Tub admitted. "We got to go back."

"You needn't bother just on my account," Jeff said with a weak attempt to show his indifference by being funny.

They ignored him, and turned back. It was now fairly light.

Then, around a sharp bend in the canyon, they came almost face to face with a lone horseman.

Hostilities began at once, with the stranger getting into action first. His first bullet zipped through the air directly in front of the four horses. Every animal's head went up in alarm, and before their riders could control them they had whirled about the other way.

Tub and his men grabbed their guns, but with their horses running the other way they found little chance to use them, and the stranger was sending a stream of bullets flying over their heads.

Jeff did some quick thinking. The stranger's bullets were not meant to menace him, he guessed, and he would be safer around the bend than elsewhere. In the stampede of the horses he was out of reach of the other men. Bringing his horse sharply under control he wheeled the animal and charged back into the canyon, hoping that he would not be mistaken for an enemy by the free-shooting individual they had met.

A bullet winged its way past his ear, but he did not try to figure out from which direction it had come. A moment more and he had rounded the bend. With intense surprise he recognized the homely features of Bilious Burket.

"Behind the rocks, buddy, till I load up ag'in," Bilious ordered. He was busy shoving cartridges into his gun, but he looked up long enough to grin

at Jeff. But before he had finished reloading Tub Pickering and his two men were far down the canyon.

There they stopped and looked back. Bilious had got his horse safely behind the bend, and he peeked out cautiously.

"*Wham!*" came a bullet that struck a ledge above his head and showered him with rock dust.

"They got rifles, huh?" Bilious grinned. "Hell of a lot o' good it'll do 'em. One six-gun behind this bend will hold the canyon till hell freezes over."

Bilious peeked out cautiously. "The ole big boy is makin' hisself a flag o' peace. Watch me spoil it," he said.

Jeff dismounted and looked around the bend. It was true that Tub Pickering was riding forward waving a soiled white handkerchief.

When Tub was fairly close, and waving the flag gently up and down Bilious stuck his gun over a bit of rock and fired. There was a gaping hole in the handkerchief, and they heard Tub swear.

"Hey!" Tub yelled. "I wanta talk. Yuh don't understand."

"Come over to the ranch some time, Pickering, if you want to parley," Jeff took it upon himself to answer.

"But—" yelled the enraged rancher.

"Drift," Bilious called succinctly. His gun spoke again, and Tub's head jerked back involuntarily as the bullet passed within inches of his nose.

The cattleman turned his horse and retreated at a gallop.

Jeff and Bilious listened till they heard the last clattering sound of the enemies' horses far down the canyon.

"How in the hell did you show up here just when you were needed so damn' bad?" Jeff demanded, in his excitement resorting to stronger language than was his habit.

"Huh, I been with yuh for hours, an' it was a dickens of a job I had too. Trailin' by sound, an' all the time takin' chances that you fellers would stop an' hear me."

"We nearly did once, but——"

"Turnin' back up this canyon was what fooled me. I didn't look for that, an' there was no place much tuh dodge. Otherwise I'd have been workin' on lead," Bilious explained.

"But how did you come——"

"Camped at the waterhole south o' Cardinal Buttes night before last an' seen yore fire. Done some prospectin' the next mornin' an' seen yuh was kinda let in fer somethin', an' thought I'd stick around. When yuh made yore brush run I loped

in an' borrowed me some grub an' then hived up in the brush tuh see how things went. Purty near mixed into things when I seen them young people gittin' in tuh it, but am mighty glad I didn't.

"When I seen you all start out I got my horse an' follered along behind. Had an idee tuh swipe all the horses an' then try tuh talk terms, but when I found they'd moved 'em all out that far from camp an' left 'em saddled I figgered there was a night ride ahead, so I kept a watch on the horses till this midnight parade started. Then I trailed along as best I could." Bilious finished the long explanation laconically, and calmly rolled himself a cigarette.

"To tell the truth I figured I'd seen the last of you, and I'm mighty glad I hadn't," Jeff said earnestly. "I don't know what they intended to do to me, but it was nothing pleasant."

"I surmise it wasn't just tuh show yuh the country," Bilious said drily.

"They were taking me to a cabin that's supposed to be in this canyon," Jeff said. "Now that we're here I suggest we have a look at it."

Bilious listened intently for a moment. "My guess is the Pick an' Rings have gone home, an' we might as well spy around if yuh don't mind goin' hungry."

They rode up the narrow canyon, and just above where they had turned down, they found a small cabin, nearly concealed in a mass of shrubbery made prolific by the seep from a cold, clear spring.

They had a drink and then proceeded to explore. Though the place seemed to be in the heart of the range there was no evidence that cattle had been there lately. Indeed, it was hard to imagine a place more isolated, or one better fitted for deeds of darkness.

With more than a little trepidation Jeff pushed open the ancient, rotting door. Only for the skill and determination of the man beside him, he reflected, he would now be entering here as a helpless victim of whatever his enemies wished to inflict upon him. His respect and liking for Bilious had increased immeasurably.

It was a one-room prospector's cabin such as may be found in any country which shows a trace of mineral. At one side was a fireplace, and there were a very few articles of mouldering furniture. The window, if there had ever been any, had long ago fallen out.

"They couldn't have intended to use this as a jail at any rate," Jeff said.

"My Gawd!" the exclamation was fairly jerked out of Bilious.

Jeff's tautened nerves made him jump. "What is it?" he gasped.

An old newspaper had been lying upon the unsteady table, and Bilious had half curiously turned it over. Underneath lay a photograph which had caused his exclamation.

It was a full length picture of a man, stripped to the waist. His face could not be seen, but the back was eloquent of supreme agony. And upon his back so clearly that the words could be read from the picture these words were branded:

I AM A FOOL

Silently Bilious stepped over beside the fireplace and picked up two delicately wrought, though fire-blackened irons which had been carefully shaped to run the letters that were upon the man's back. The cold ashes upon the hearth added the last touch of realism. Their imaginations could picture the horrible details of the branding.

"My Gawd!" Bilious repeated. "Brandin' him was bad enough, without insultin' him by takin' his picture."

"That man," said Jeff with conviction, "was one of the managers of the Cross Anchor. No wonder the poor devils didn't want to tell what had scared them out of here!"

"An they was bringin' yuh here tuh give yuh the same medicine," Bilious breathed. "I wish I'd missed that rag I shot at."

Jeff reached out and took the other man's hand.

"Old man, you surely saved me from a lot." He shuddered. "Think of having to wear a thing like that the rest of your life. But if I had got it I hope I'd have had courage enough to fight it through to the finish."

Bilious only nodded. It was human nature to want to conceal a humiliation like that, and he knew it.

"Well, we'd better be getting out of here," Jeff said. For some reason he felt himself turning sick. Bilious did not help the feeling any when he picked up the irons and ran his finger over the business ends of them.

"One's a bar an' the other a quarter circle," he observed. "Yuh kin make any brand in the world with them two irons, but it'd take several reheatin's tuh make all them letters with 'em."

"Come on," Jeff choked. But he wrapped the newspaper around the picture and took it along for evidence, and he did not object when Bilious also brought the irons.

CHAPTER XIII

CALLERS

IT seemed the part of wisdom to get back to the Cross Anchor ranch as soon as possible, rather than attempt to back-track to where Mattie and Ray had been left. Even if that were not difficult of itself it was certain that the boy and girl would be gone somewhere—home, most likely.

Once out of the labyrinth of cross-cutting canyons where the cabin was located they had little difficulty finding their way to the ranch; though with their tired horses they made poor time, and it was getting well into the afternoon when they arrived.

The first person to meet them was Mrs. Childs, and her twitching face and hands betrayed her anxiety.

"Oh, Mr. Singleton, have you seen my children?" she demanded anxiously.

"Why, yes, Mrs. Childs," Jeff answered soothingly. "Haven't they got back yet?"

"No. We worried some because they didn't come home last night, but they take trips like that sometimes, though always before they've let us know

where they was goin'. Then this mornin' Lem Tooke was here, an' he said you had been killed by Tub Pickering, an' that two other people were with you. By the description of the horses we knew it was Mattie and Ray," the anguished woman cried.

"I wasn't killed, and I am sure they'll be along any time now," Jeff assured her. "Is Tooke around here now?"

"No. He went with Ezra and some of the men back to them Cardinal Buttes. An' I'm always afraid Ezra an' Tub Pickering will fight sometime," the woman lamented.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Childs," Jeff told her. "We drew out of there all right, but we got separated in the night. I'm sure Mattie and Ray will be along soon, but we'll change horses and go look for 'em."

He had the cook prepare a hasty meal while Bilious was driving in some extra horses, and they saddled up immediately after eating.

"What about this horse you've been riding?" Jeff asked Bilious. "Belongs to Pickering, don't he?"

"He may think so," Bilious said drily, "but we'll leave him here."

Jeff was certain now that Mattie had gone on to the Pick and Ring ranch, naturally thinking that

Pickering had taken him there. He had little fear of anything happening to her, but he detested the idea of her going to the Pickering ranch at all. Also he was aware that the Pick and Ring ranch was likely to be a most unpleasant place for him and Bilious to visit, but he owed it to Mattie and Ray to see that no harm befell them.

Before leaving he looked around the place for a gun of some kind, but the only weapon he could find was an old, single barreled shotgun. This he appropriated.

"If yuh can't shoot her, she may come in handy for a club," Bilious giped.

With fresh horses under them they made good time toward the Pick and Ring, but at that it was dusk when they approached the gate with its emblem and its sinister warning, which still bore the evidence of Bilious' sense of humor.

"Better let me ride in alone," Bilious suggested. "They may have some more brandin' irons in there."

"They don't love you any more than they do me," Jeff said. "I was going to suggest that I go in alone. You can come if you hear the shotgun."

"Whoa-up!" Bilious ejaculated. "Here comes somebody."

They withdrew along the fence and found a low gully that would conceal their horses. Then Jeff

crept along the fence until he could see the gate. There were three people on horseback, and it was still light enough for him to identify Mattie and Ray. And the man with them, he could tell by the size, was Gus Pickering.

In a moment Jeff made his way back to the horses, and with a word to Bilius they mounted and cut across to head the others off.

Ray was the first to recognize them, and he vented a wild whoop of satisfaction. The relief in Mattie's face was no less obvious.

"Oh, Mr. Singleton, I'm so glad you escaped," she said earnestly. "I have been——"

"Now, didn't I tell you he'd be all right?" Gus spoke up laughingly. "I told yuh Dad was just playin' a joke on him."

"Nice sense of humor your father has," Jeff said irritably. "I think he'll have to explain his ideas of a good joke one of these times—to a hangman!"

"About the same time your friend here explains his peculiar brand o' humor in stealin' horses an' settin' some of our men afoot on the range," Gus retorted.

Bilius chuckled. "Does them boys still need tuh have the joke explained?" he queried.

"My father can't be blamed for resentin' the attempts that have been made to ruin his character,

but I'll admit that he's too hot-headed," Gus said.

"I think it's the most foolish thing in the world, this trouble," Mattie said. "Gus, you must make your father understand that my father wouldn't steal his cattle, and I'll try to do the same with mine."

"We could fix it all up if it wasn't for these—these so-called managers that come in here makin' trouble," Gus said.

"Possibly my company might be willing not to have any representative here if you'd only speak to them about it," Jeff said sarcastically.

Gus only grinned, and crowded his horse close against Mattie's. His hand was on the cantle of her saddle, and he leaned over to whisper confidentially in her ear.

"Your mother is badly worried, Miss Childs, and your father has gone to Cardinal Buttes to search for you. If you'll excuse Mr. Pickering I think we'd better hurry," Jeff said.

"Mr. Pickering declines to be excused, an' you're welcome to hurry all you please," Gus retorted.

"Come on, Jeff, lē's go," Ray said disgustedly, and because there seemed to be nothing but the prospect of a row if he stayed along with young Pickering and the girl, Jeff galloped ahead with the boy.

He did not discover at once that Bilious had chosen to remain with the other two.

"What'd old Tub try tuh do to yuh?" Ray asked the first thing.

"Well, whatever it was Bilious spoiled it all for him by coming along at the right time," Jeff said. He was not ready to tell everything that had occurred, especially to the boy.

"Funny man, Bilious, ain't he?" The boy went on without waiting for an answer. "Yuh know Dad an' all my folks thinks he's the real Mogul, an' that yuh're just a figgerhead sent out here to cover up his tracks."

"Do they?" Jeff asked. This joke of his in letting Bilious pose for him was bearing bitter fruit. No wonder Mattie did not take him seriously. He reflected grimly that he could impress her with his authority by discharging her father; but that would mean sending her away too, and he could not tolerate that thought.

Yet his sober sense told him that he might have to do that very thing if it should turn out that Childs was crooked. That, however, was a mere possibility, and the events of the last two days had convinced him that the Pickerings were at the bottom of all the trouble.

Jeff went at once to his room. He could hear Mrs.

Childs rejoicing over the safe return of Ray and later he heard Mattie and Gus Pickering come in. An hour or so later he heard Gus leave, and some time in the night he heard Ezra Childs arrive. Soon after that Jeff fell asleep from sheer weariness, though his mind still seemed to grapple confusedly with his problems all through the night.

In the morning Childs greeted him with that some air of calm condescension which had marked his treatment from the first. At the breakfast table he found Mattie often regarding him furtively, and with what he took to be either pity or contempt in her eyes.

"Did you find Pickering's cattle that were over at the buttes?" Jeff asked the foreman.

"Saw nothin' of 'em. Decided that Tooke had been lyin'," Childs said.

Jeff said nothing, wondering if Mattie would let her father's remark pass that way.

"I told father all about it," she said.

"I wish I'd have knowed Tub Pickering was waitin' for me up there, I'd have shore obliged him by comin'," Childs said.

"I wish you and Tub would quit being so suspicious of each other. I believe somebody is fooling you both," Mattie declared.

"I ain't forgot that it was him who busted Henry

Clarke," Childs rasped with more emotion than Jeff had ever heard him display.

"I'd like to talk with you a few minutes after breakfast," Jeff said, and the foreman nodded.

When they were alone Jeff told the foreman frankly where he had been taken by Tub Pickering, and what he had found there. For the first time he saw Childs nervous. The man chewed at his mustache and paced up and down nervously.

"What're yuh goin' to do about it?" he snapped suddenly when Jeff had finished.

"My idea was to take the evidence out to the county seat and turn it over to the district attorney. Then I intended to get hold of these men who were run out, and find out just why they left. I can understand why none of them would care to take the initiative, but when they find out the game will be exposed anyway they'll be glad to tell all they know," Jeff declared.

"Yuh think any of 'em was actually branded?"

"There's the picture," Jeff stated.

"I know." Childs was silent for some time. "Didn't it occur t' you that he wouldn't 'a' dared t' hurt yuh any when my boy an' gal knowed he had yuh as a prisoner?" he asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know. I expect, though, he figured on scaring me into silence as he did the others."

"Just the same I'd wait a while before I done anything rash," Childs said, and again Jeff thought he detected that note of half-amused contempt. "I'll bet," Childs continued, "that yuh'll see Tub Pickering over here before noon."

"I'll wait for him," Jeff said shortly.

This was the first time Jeff had had an opportunity really to work at his job. He called for the foreman's books, and forthwith proceeded to look over the accounts. Each month the accounts of the ranch were forwarded to the main office of the Hood Company, there to be audited, and Jeff learned little that was new to him. One thing he did learn was that Mattie kept her father's books, and made out his reports. If there was any crookedness on the ranch the books did not disclose it.

Jeff was brooding over the books when a sound in the doorway caused him to look up. There stood Mattie with a trace of hesitancy in her manner.

"I thought you might want me to explain something about the books," she said. "You see—I keep them."

"So I've noticed, and a very good job you've done," he praised her. "If it was as easy to make this ranch pay as it is to read your bookkeeping this job would be a cinch."

She came over and stood beside his chair, looking over his shoulder. "It's a tough job, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is, but it's not unbeatable. Crooks are operating here, but we'll get them in spite of their campaign of terrorization."

"Who do you mean by we?" Mattie quizzed.

"Well, me and Bilious—and the rest of the force."

"Strange man, Bilious. Last night—" she broke off with a ripple of laughter. "It was funny the way he stuck to us. I believe Gus wanted to kill him."

"Very likely. It was your friend Gus who ordered his men to take Bilious to the head of Wagon Track Gorge and leave him there afoot," Jeff said drily.

"Gus said that was his father. It's one of Tub's old tricks. Probably he intended to serve you something like that."

"Something like that," Jeff repeated grimly.

"Won't you talk with Gus, and try to arrive at an understanding—or, will Bilious have to do that?"

"Bilious probably will speak to Gus in due time," Jeff said grimly. "But so far as running this outfit is concerned Bilious has nothing to say about it."

My first formal action as manager is to appoint a bookkeeper here at a good salary. Just enter the name on these books, will you?"

"Whose name?" she asked, puzzled.

"Your name. And while you're about it have Ray put on the pay roll as chore boy at thirty dollars a month."

"Really, Mr. Singleton——"

"Jeff," he said firmly.

"I—I can't thank you enough, Jeff," she faltered. "It is one of the things father has always resented. Mr. Graves says a foreman has no business employing members of his own family."

"Well, I'm employing you and it will stand," Jeff said firmly.

"You—mean well," Mattie said softly. Her eyes held a far away expression.

"But you think this job is too big for me?" he asked straightforwardly.

"I—I didn't want to say so, but this is a big thing even without the trouble, and you are—well—rather young." She was blushing, but would not dissemble her opinion. And he liked her even more for it.

He laughed. "I knew it was a big proposition when I came here, but now I know I'll win because I've got a big incentive to do so."

"What is that?"

"To show myself and you that I'm man enough to handle this."

"But why should you care about showing me? I'm nobody," Mattie smiled.

Jeff sprang to his feet, and seized her hand. "Nobody? Mattie, you're the most remarkable girl I've ever known in all my life. I don't know why, but——"

One shred of sanity remained to him, and he checked himself before speaking words which would surely have created an impossible situation between himself and his foreman's family. Yet the wave of color that swept over Mattie's face was evidence enough that she had guessed his unspoken words.

"I think mother wants me," Mattie gasped hurriedly, and left the room.

Jeff's thoughts were in a turmoil. The most foolish thing in the world was to fall in love at such a time, and under such conditions; that he knew. But he could not deny the fact; nor did he try to stifle his resentment when he thought of Gus Pickering courting her.

The Pickerings had to be exposed and beaten. In no other way could he prove to Mattie that he measured up to his job, and apparently in no other

way could Gus Pickering be made to lose his standing.

He was ready for war.

And looking out of his window at that moment he saw both the Pickerings ride up.

CHAPTER XIV

MISSING EVIDENCE

FOR a moment Jeff paused uncertainly. In spite of Ezra Childs' opinion that Tub Pickering would put in an appearance that morning he had not believed the man would exercise such amazing, colossal nerve.

He saw Ezra Childs come forward to meet them, and a moment later Childs and Gus came toward the house, while Tub waited by the gate.

"Pickering wants to talk to yuh, Singleton," Childs called to Jeff.

"Tell him to come in here then," Jeff called back.

Childs dutifully returned to the gate, and after a little argument Pickering accompanied him back. Could those two men hate each other as bad as they pretended?

Then Tub loomed in the door. "I wanta private talk with you," he said.

"Come in and shut the door," Jeff retorted.

"Young fellow, things didn't go just as I planned yesterday," Tub snorted.

"Evidently not," Jeff said cynically. The photo-

graph of the branded man lay upon his desk where Tub could see it plainly, and Jeff toyed with it idly.

"You found that, then?" Tub asked.

"And the branding irons," Jeff amended.

"Makes a man shudder, don't it?"

"It might under certain circumstances. I can imagine this would make a guilty man shudder in a courtroom," Jeff said.

"Yeah, if we knew who he was," Tub said.

"Say, what kind of a bluff are you trying to run?" Jeff demanded crisply.

"No bluff at all. But if it hadn't been fer that detective I'd have took yuh up to that cabin myself an' showed yuh them things."

Jeff's ironical smile made Tub wave a huge paw protestingly.

"Yuh don't understand. I'm plumb tired o' bein' slandered by the people who come on this ranch here. They spread it far an' wide that I'm a thief, an' I ain't. Instead of takin' you in there to hurt yuh as yuh think, I just wanted t' show yuh what somebody else had done t' these other managers. We just discovered the place accidentally."

There was no denying Tub's earnestness, but he failed utterly to convince the younger man.

"That's too thin. You can't make me believe that after the way you went about it," Jeff said.

"I'll tell you now that a man who would do a thing like this"—he indicated the picture—"is too brutal to be called human. I'm going to find the original of this picture and see that you go over the road for it."

Pickering's small eyes gleamed murderously.

"Yuh're just a simple fool like the rest of 'em," he raged. "Why don't yuh fire Ez Childs if yuh wanta git rid of the cattle thief, and the man brander?"

"That's enough," Jeff ordered curtly. "I tell you this fight is on to a finish. You came over here the other night to warn me off your range. I'm giving you the same orders now. Stay off, you and your men."

"Yeah? Yuh damned whipper-snapper, lemme git my hands on yuh," Tub panted.

Jeff rose to meet the assault of the ponderous cattleman, and swung his chair hard against Tub's knees. The man stumbled over the chair and with a roar of rage and pain brought up against the wall.

He whirled and rushed Jeff again, and the smaller man set himself calculatingly to meet it. Despite Tub's mammoth build Jeff felt that his greater speed would enable him to more than hold his own. But he wished that they were outside where there was more room.

Jeff drove his fists viciously into the man's bulging stomach, but he was rushed back against the wall of the small room by the sheer weight of his antagonist. Then they clinched and staggered over the furniture, and both fell a moment later when Tub stumbled over another chair and bore his antagonist down with him.

Jeff was eager to get loose so that he could use his fists, but found himself held in an unbreakable grip. Then he discovered that someone was pulling him away from Tub, and he saw Gus tugging at his father. He saw the anxious faces of Mattie and her mother, and the wildly excited one of Ray, who was cheering him on madly.

Then Gus Pickering and Childs dragged the combatants apart. Both were breathing heavily, and anxious to get at each other again. Everybody seemed to be talking at once. Gus Pickering was backing his parent slowly toward the wall; and standing in the doorway with an amused grin on his face was Bilious Burket.

"But he ordered us off the place," Tub was trying to make his son understand.

"You go on, Dad. You leave this to me," Gus urged, and eventually he got Tub outside, Bilious stepping aside to let him pass. Not until then did Childs release Jeff.

Gus turned to Jeff, who had followed them outside. "I don't know what the quarrel was about, but my father is always violent an' quick tempered. I take it you are, too."

"All I've got to say is that he can't come here and bully this ranch any more. I told him I wanted him and his men to stay off, and that goes," Jeff said.

"Does that apply to me?" Gus demanded icily.

Jeff's eye fell upon Mattie. She would resent having the gates closed against Gus. He could not tell what it might lead to, and on the face of things Gus was not implicated in his father's crookedness nor bullying.

"Until I have something to indicate that you are personally not all right you can come and go as you wish," he said, and saw a look of gratitude flash in Mattie's eyes.

Presently Tub Pickering mounted his horse and rode away. Gus came back and handed Jeff his gun. "Bill Murphy sent this to you," he said, and walked away with Mattie.

Jeff walked out to the corrals accompanied by Ray and Bilius, trying to get his temper under control. It was easy to get over Tub's assault upon him, for he had at least held his own there; but it was the supreme insolence of the Pickerings which

angered him. He had sent Tub about his business, but Gus was still there, and Jeff had no more use for him than for his father.

"Things have moved faster than I wanted them to, Bilious," he said, "but I reckon it had just as well be open warfare as not. I'm not going to wait for them to start things either. Your wages are raised twenty-five a month right now, and you are cattle boss."

"Wait till I git a hold o' my coat; I don't want all the buttons tuh fly off," Bilious said.

"What about dad?" Ray spoke up anxiously.

"The ranch is enough for him to run. He's been trying to handle too much," Jeff said. "I'm going to Salina to start criminal action against Tub Pickering, and when I get back we'll start a general roundup of the cattle to find out just what we've got."

"Sounds like business," Bilious said.

"I mean business. Now I want you to come up to my room, because there's something I want to show you."

The two men walked back toward the house, while the boy stood regarding them thoughtfully.

"I want you to study these brands," Jeff said when they were in his room. He took a pencil and drew the same marks he had made a few days be-

fore, and passed the paper over to Bilious, who studied it frowningly.

"What I can't figure out," Jeff acknowledged, "is what those Pick and Ring cattle were doing up there among the Cardinal Buttes. Somebody besides Pickering drove those cattle up there, and I'm sure he thinks it was Childs."

"It would pay us a heap more tuh round up them Pick and Ring cattle than our own," Bilious murmured. "In fact if I'm cattle boss I believe I'd ruther try a little one man roundup over there than anything else."

"Do you mean that, Bilious?" Jeff asked earnestly. "They hate you as much as they do me, maybe more. It would be pretty dangerous to try to ride their range."

"Well, they think I'm a detective anyway, an' if they're stealin' cattle from here it's a cinch they're ridin' our range, so I won't be in any more danger than they are."

"All right, old man. I'm feeling mighty lucky to think that I picked up a friend like you," Jeff said sincerely.

"We're a great little pair o' jokers, ain't we?" Bilious grinned. But they involuntarily shook hands. They had formed a strong liking for each other, these two, and Jeff felt that in Bilious he had

one dependable friend in the difficult task confronting him.

"Well, take anything you need to help you, and be careful," Jeff said. "Try and let me know every few days how you are coming along. In the meantime I'll take this picture and branding irons down to the prosecuting attorney and——"

He paused abruptly. His hand had been groping for the picture which he had left lying upon his desk, but it was not there. The room was badly disheveled from the struggle that had taken place there, and he thought the picture might have fallen somewhere else, but it was not to be located. He looked next for the small branding irons, but they too, had disappeared.

"Now, where do you suppose——?" He stepped decisively into the other part of the house. To his surprise he found Mattie and her mother alone.

"Where is Gus?" he asked.

"He went out into the orchard to talk to my father," Mattie answered apprehensively.

"You didn't notice him pick up a picture and some small irons in my room, did you?" Jeff questioned.

"No," both women answered.

"You didn't see them at all?" he persisted.

"No."

He walked on through the house and out at the back into the small orchard of plum, pear, and apple trees, and a number of rows of small berry bushes.

At the farther end of it Gus was talking to Ezra Childs. At Jeff's approach they stopped talking and faced him silently.

"Either of you see anything of a certain picture, and some branding irons that were in my room?" he demanded tersely.

"Not a thing," Childs replied.

Gus only looked blank.

"They didn't walk away, and Tub Pickering had no chance to get them. Neither Mrs. Childs nor Mattie saw anything of them. It leaves it up to one of you men," Jeff shot out.

"If yo're intimatin' that I'd steal things outa yore room I guess me an' my family had just as well move," Childs said hotly.

"I'm not intimating that. I don't believe for a minute you moved them. I'm just eliminating the thing down to Pickering here," Jeff retorted.

Gus's face twisted with fury, but he made no hostile moves. "I walked straight out here from the house. Search me if you want to," he offered.

It was all too evident that the branding irons were not upon his person so a search would be futile.

"Make a search around the orchard for 'em, Jeff," directed Childs, and, as by this time Bilious and Ray had come around the house, and Mattie and her mother had come out of the house, a general search was conducted in which Gus alone took no part. Nothing was found.

"I'm sorry that I'll have to tell you the same thing I did your father," Jeff said to Gus. "Those articles would have helped send your father to the penitentiary. I don't know as I blame you for hiding them, but since it's certain that you did this ranch is closed to you. Don't come here again as long as I'm manager."

"Mr. Singleton, that is unjust. There is just as much evidence that I hid those things as there is that Gus did." A bright, red spot glowed in Mattie's cheeks as she faced the manager defiantly.

Jeff knew at that moment that he was wildly in love with her. His action would probably alienate her forever, but he could not afford to weaken.

"There's all the difference in the world, Mattie," he said gently. "You have no motive to hide those things—Pickering has."

Mattie went over to her father's side. "Daddy, don't you see this situation is impossible? We must leave here."

For a moment Jeff's heart stood still. If they

left he would never meet Mattie again; she would see to that. And he was young enough to take it as a tragedy that would ruin his life if he failed to win this girl.

"No," Childs said stubbornly. "I offered to resign a few minutes ago, but I see that I've got to stick here till this affair is cleared up. Why, gal, don't you see if I quit now they'd blame everything on to me?"

"Then tell Mr. Singleton that Gus has always tried to make peace between you and his father," the distracted girl requested.

"Yes, he's always done that," Childs submitted.

"I can't help all that," Jeff said. "Mattie, this affair is more than a private feud between Tub Pickering and your father. It is my job to protect my employer's interests. I am ordering Gus here to stay away because he is a part of the conspiracy against the company."

"All right, bozo. You've give yore orders; now le's see yuh enforce 'em!" Gus sneered.

CHAPTER XV

A TUMULTUOUS MOMENT

JEFF was spending a rare afternoon in his room some two weeks after his interrupted fight with Tub Pickering, when the door opened and Bilious Burket stood on the threshold.

Instantly Jeff jumped up to welcome the ungainly puncher. "Lord, I've been worried about you," he confessed.

"I've been some worried about myself at times," Bilious admitted. "Never had to hotfoot so much in my life as the last few days. Danged if I don't think they resent my ridin' that Pick an' Ring range."

"I shouldn't wonder," Jeff laughed. "What did you find out?"

"Not a thing that's worth a cuss to us," Bilious confessed. "If there's an animal on that range that ever wore the Cross Anchor brand I failed to see it. But I did find some horses over there that I happen tuh know belongs down on the Dirty Devil."

"That so? By the way, there was a rider here

from that country looking for you the other day. Fellows was his name."

"That so?" Bilious twisted uneasily. "Fine jigger—like tuh have seen him," he said presently.

"He left a letter for you," Jeff said, handing out an envelope.

Bilious ripped a thumbnail along the top of the envelope and proceeded to read.

Dear Bilious:

Don't be a chump. There's always a place for you down here, so you don't have to work for those horsethieves up there. And don't think for a minute that I'm standing in the way between you and Marie. I'm simply not a ladies' man. Come on down and we'll fix things up.

Rube.

Bilious crumpled the letter up in his hand thoughtfully. "Fer two bits I'd quit you cold," he stated.

Jeff gave a jerk. "Why—what's the trouble?"

"Oh, nothin' that yo're fault of—an' nobody's offered me two bits," Bilious said. "Good, big hearted old Rube," he muttered to himself. "But I can't do it—I couldn't take advantage of a man like that."

"How's things been goin' here?" he shot out a moment later.

"Rotten," Jeff confessed. "I've hired a few new men, and things seems to be going nicely on the surface, but I haven't found out a thing, and I'm being jumped on already." He fumbled in his desk and brought forth another letter which he handed to Bilious to read.

Dear Singleton:

Your report makes it clear that the Pickerings have been robbing us. But on the face of it they could not have done much without the acquiescence of the people on our ranch. I note that you have not as yet followed my suggestion about discharging Childs. I strongly urge you to make a clean sweep at the earliest opportunity. Of course this cannot be done at once, but you might make some move in that direction instead of putting his girl and boy on the payroll.

*Sincerely,
Homer Graves.*

"Short and to the point, huh?" Bilious allowed.

"He's a damn' meddler," Jeff said irritably. "No wonder the other managers quit."

"Ever think about tryin' his advice?" Bilious asked quizzically.

"That's the hell of it!" Jeff confessed. "We can't talk in here; they might hear us. Let's take a ride."

"Gosh, got a bran' new saddle, an danged if I don't notice yo're dressed like a man," Bilius said with an admiring grin, as he took in Jeff's new outfit. Dressed in a flannel shirt, and with his legs encased in worn, leather chaps Jeff did indeed look much more like a rancher than he had at first.

"Hey, Jeff, can I go along?" Ray came yelling through the corral dragging his heavy saddle hopefully.

"'Fraid not, Ray. It'll be time for you to get those milk cows in before we get back."

The boy looked his disappointment, but since Jeff had put him on the payroll he took his orders like a man, without a word of complaint. And Jeff discovered that the boy was worth a lot more than many a man on the ranch drawing half again as much wages.

"There's one of the reasons I can't follow Graves' advice," Jeff remarked as they rode away. "For some reason that boy has taken up with me. Think what it would mean if I fired his dad?"

"I reckon it would hurt his family purty bad," Bilius agreed, "but if the old man is crooked——"

"Do you know anything?" Jeff asked sharply.

"I never been accused o' knowin' much," Bilious said meekly.

"I mean, have you any reason to suspect Childs?"

"No-o. Of course it looks funny about them Pick and Ring cattle over by Cardinal Buttes that time. It's sorta funny, too, that Pickering would take them managers over to Cross Anchor range tuh do his brandin' of 'em, an' be careless enough tuh leave his tools layin' around—tuh say nothin' of the picture. It strikes me he'd be likely tuh do his dirty work on his own range," Bilious said.

"You believe Pickering's story then, that he was just kidnapping me to show me that cabin?" Jeff asked sarcastically.

"I wouldn't say that," Bilious said slowly, "but another funny thing is about them irons an' the picture disappearin' that day. Young Pickering simply couldn't have hid 'em that day without some of the Childs family helpin' him."

"You think Mattie——"

"I don't think—the process is too painful—but I'm just sayin' it would have been easier for Childs to have hid 'em than anybody else."

"They're not hidden in the orchard, I'm sure of that," Jeff admitted.

"Nor in the house—now; yuh can bet yore sweet life," Bilious said. "There's just one thing more;

no Cross Anchor cattle are bein' stole by the Pick an' Ring outfit now, or I'm a blind man. I don't believe they'll try it at all in the summer time. Down around Desolation next winter——"

"My God, we can't wait till next winter," Jeff exclaimed. He was in anything but a happy mood. He now saw clearly enough that Bilious had put into words suspicions which had hovered in his own mind, but which he had been too obstinate to admit.

In his mind he saw himself discharging Childs, and telling him he was under suspicion of being a thief, and he could vision the horror and contempt in Mattie's eyes.

"Hell, it would be a cowardly thing to do, to fire a man on suspicion," he broke out explosively. "There's got to be some real evidence before I'll do it!"

"Shore," Bilious agreed, and Jeff looked at him suspiciously.

"Why would Ez Childs do such a thing?" Jeff demanded angrily.

"Yeah, why? That's the point!" Bilious said. "No motive whatever fer him stealin' cattle from his own employers, an' runnin' the managers out except that by keepin' the managers on the run he keeps himself in actual control where he can do

what he wants to. But as yuh say he ain't that kind of a man, even if he did git sore because his old boss, Clarke, went busted, an' was foreclosed by the people who own the lay-out now."

There was poison in Bilious' seemingly innocent remarks, and Jeff knew it.

"But if Childs is guilty the Pickerings are innocent, and there is more evidence against them than him," Jeff maintained.

"Quite correct," Bilious said.

"Well, we'll start that roundup and see where we stand," Jeff remarked. "After it's over I may start to clean house a bit, but right now I can't spare a single man. In fact, we need more than we've got."

"Who is goin' tuh run this said roundup?" Bilious inquired.

"I'll be on the job myself, but I've made you cattle boss. I don't want to have to give many orders myself, and besides I don't know the range well enough."

"Neither do I, an' if yuh don't mind I'd rather just scout around when I feel like it," Bilious suggested.

"Good enough. I'll let either Childs or Ed Haines run it, but the thing we want is a correct count, and I'll look after that myself," Jeff declared.

While Jeff and Biliou were riding together that afternoon Mattie availed herself of the opportunity to clean up the manager's room. It was her habit carefully to avoid the desk where he kept his papers, but this afternoon noticing a badly scattered litter of papers she moved over and began to straighten them up involuntarily.

Not having her eyes shut they lighted upon a single line of a letter that lay uppermost upon the desk. "*Instead of putting his boy and girl on the payroll.*" Anything not directly concerning her would not have made a dent in her consciousness, but this brought her up with a jerk.

She saw that the letter was signed by Homer Graves, and half doubtfully sweeping a glance up the typewritten sheet she saw the name of her father. Something not entirely of her own volition caused her to absorb rather than read the entire contents of the letter.

She stood with her hands on the edge of the desk gazing mutely at the piece of paper which had swept her world from under her feet.

Somehow she was not so much surprised as pained. With the evident dissatisfaction manifested by the company they should have expected anything. Yet so far as they knew only the managers were blamed. The Childs family was al-

most an institution on the ranch; Mattie and Ray had lived all their lives there. Yet Mattie was the only one, it seemed, who had considered the possibility of their being discharged, and she had thought of it as a vague disaster that might overtake them if things continued to grow worse. She had once or twice suggested to her father that they move away, but his gruff refusal had silenced her.

The blow would just about kill him, she thought.

She looked at the letter again. Why had not the blow already fallen? Singleton was obviously disobeying orders, and would probably lose his own job if he did not discharge his foreman. Probably he was only waiting to find a successor to him.

She could not understand Jeff Singleton. She had accepted her father's version that Jeff was only a figurehead with Bilious Burket the real head, and she had rather resented the fact that they had used her to start their deception. But this letter indicated that Jeff, for all his youth, was really in command at the ranch.

His attitude toward her had also been puzzling. Though not exactly making love to her his manner had implied that he thought very well of her indeed. But he would have acted the same way toward any other girl under the same circumstances, she argued. And really she had little time for anything

like that. In her was always one great, depressing worry which struck her cold with benumbed dread every time she permitted her mind to dwell upon it. Not once had she admitted to herself that she really feared this thing, and yet its grim possibilities shadowed her life.

That dread was that her father was a crook.

Now, for the first time, she dragged the slimy thought out into the light and tried to consider it with unbiased reason.

He had always insisted that few cattle had been stolen—that the losses were from natural causes. Never had she been quite able to swallow that. She knew the enmity that had existed between her father and Henry Clarke on one side and Tub Pickering on the other, yet her father had not accused Pickering of the theft, though the different managers sent out by the company had been of that opinion.

She had often wondered why he had not tried to keep Gus Pickering from coming to see her. Was it because he feared to? More than once Gus had dropped a word which indicated that it might be hard for her father to stop him if he wanted to.

Then there had been the affair at Cardinal Buttes. Pickering's cattle had been stolen, and Tub had been sincere in thinking her father was back of

that. Could it be true that he was stealing cattle from both outfits, and that Gus Pickering knew it?

One thing was certain; things could not go on as they were. "I—I—don't believe it," she cried aloud. "But he must be warned of the blow that's about to fall."

She finished clearing up the room, and neatly arranged the papers on the desk, with the Graves letter on top. Her father was somewhere on the ranch preparing for the haying that was about to start, but she saw Jeff Singleton and Bilious ride up to the corral, and a little later she saw Jeff coming to the house alone. She suddenly determined to find out just when the blow would fall before going to her father.

Jeff was startled to see the girl behind his desk when he came in, and something in her face made him step hastily forward. She dropped her eyes, and after gazing at her a moment he looked to see what was absorbing her attention. Then he saw the letter.

"Mattie, I'm sorry I was so careless leaving that letter around," he murmured.

"I should apologize for reading it," she said with a wan smile. "I wouldn't had I not seen a line that was about me—and then I couldn't resist till I had read it all. When are you going to discharge us?"

"Not at all," he responded quickly. "At the present time I have no intention of following Graves' suggestion."

"Why not?"

"I am satisfied."

"You'll lose your own job," she pointed out.

"I'll take the chance."

"Why should you take a chance?" she demanded.

"That letter shows they don't trust my father one bit. He's under suspicion of—of being a crook."

"That's one reason why I'm keeping him," Jeff said. "As long as he is under suspicion only, no one has the right to make that suspicion permanent until there is positive proof that he is either guilty or innocent."

The girl's eyes grew suddenly luminous. "You're awfully fair, Jeff, but I'm afraid you aren't being fair to yourself."

"I am. I'm not capable of holding this job unless I can straighten out everything here that's been going wrong. If I can't do it, I deserve to be fired. If I can I will have found out who has been stealing cattle and branding men," he said aggressively.

"Branding men?" Her voice expressed her horror.

"I didn't mean to tell you, but that picture I

was looking for the other day was a photograph of one of the previous managers here with his back covered with a hideous brand. That was the thing which frightened those men away. That was where Tub Pickering was taking me—to give me a similar treatment. That is why I think Gus Pickering stole the picture and the irons.”

“Oh, dear,” the girl worried. “They may, yet——”

“They may, but it won’t make me quit.”

“You’re a man, Jeff. I’m afraid I misjudged you. And I do appreciate the way you stick by us,” she said softly.

“Mattie, I couldn’t help sticking by you,” he burst out. “I know folks think your father is the main thief, but I’m going to clear his name and hang this stealing where it belongs—on the Pickerings.”

“You don’t know they’re guilty, and—you don’t know my father is innocent,” Mattie murmured.

“Well, it don’t make one damned bit of difference,” he ejaculated hoarsely, “I know I love you. I’m crazy about you, and I’d be crazy about you if I knew you were a thief yourself.”

He seized her arms so tightly that his grip hurt, but she did not notice that. Her eyes were on his face questioningly. Her lips quivered. She did

not want to be carried away like this, but she seemed to lack power of will.

Then his arms were about her, and she suddenly relaxed. Her soft, warm, brown hair was against his shoulder. His lips came down to hers, and she clung to him.

"You—you like me, don't you?" he asked fatuously.

"I love you, Jeff, but I never guessed it until right now," she smiled.

His arms closed about her hungrily again.

"Gosh, Matt, what would Gus Pickering say if he could see you now?" demanded a quizzical voice.

Whirling toward the door they saw Ray grinning at them mischievously, while just behind him, with a still larger grin on his face, stood Bilious Burket.

CHAPTER XVI

REAL EVIDENCE

MATTIE CHILDS was a very happy girl. She had tolerated the advances of Gus Pickering for the sake of establishing peace between the two families, but now love had come to her as she had always wanted it to come, with a sudden, even violent burst of passion. It was perfectly clear to her now that she would have loved Jeff from the first had she not been somewhat overawed by his position of authority. Even then she had thought him somewhat boyish for the job he held; this, she now fondly believed, was because she was so unconsciously drawn to him. And now with the natural unreasonableness of one in love she imagined Jeff big enough for any job.

At the same time it was not her intention to let Jeff do the job alone. She meant to offer him what help she could, and the first thing she meant to do was relieve him of a most distressing situation which confronted him on account of her father.

Despite Jeff's avowed intention to stick by her father until things were cleared up she realized that

the manager's own position would be endangered by doing so. She knew that her father had saved enough to support his family, and would be suffering no real inconvenience without his job. She intended to persuade him to resign, and thus put an end to a disagreeable situation.

To that end she had a talk with her father at the first opportunity.

"Daddy," she said, caressing the lapel of his coat with two small fingers, "haven't you ever thought seriously of quitting the ranch here?"

"What?" He bent a stern, reprimanding glance upon her.

"Why not, daddy? You and mother have been here so long, you'd enjoy living in town."

"We would, eh? I suppose the town bug has bit you again. Well, me an' yore ma is satisfied all right here."

"But haven't you thought that your staying here might make it hard on Jeff?"

"What the hell do I care about Jeff?" he sneered.

"You ought to, daddy," Mattie said with a smile and a blush. "I—I'm going to marry him."

"What?" Childs roared. He seized her arm and drew her toward him so violently that she gave a cry of pain.

"That's right," she said, half defiantly.

"Why, why, the damned sneak!" Childs choked out.

"He's not!" Mattie flamed. "Even you can't say that about him. I won't have it."

"I'll say what I please about him, an' you can forget about marryin' him, too," Childs said huskily. "He's not a-goin' t' be here long anyway."

"Oh, isn't he?" the girl retorted. All her carefully laid scheme to wheedle him into resigning was now forgotten in her resentment at his attitude. "He'll be here longer than you will. I thought you'd be willing to resign when you found out I was going to marry him, and that your staying on was causing him trouble."

"You want me t' resign t' save him firin' me—is that the idea?" he sneered.

"No—and yes," she said impatiently. "He's been ordered to discharge you—I can show you the letter—but he refuses to do it. If he doesn't discharge you he will be fired himself."

"Well, it's all right with me if the company wants to fire him," Childs said cynically.

"But don't you see that you'll be discharged anyway?" she demanded.

"Managers have come an' gone before, an' I'm still here," he pointed out.

"Father, why do you take the stand you do?"

she asked soberly. "Is it true that you are stealing company cattle, and——"

"No, by God, it ain't true!" he yelled. "Have I got to listen to my own child callin' me a thief?"

"And is it true that you are the man who has run the other managers away?" Mattie continued firmly.

"I won't be cross-examined by you," he thundered. "An' yo're not goin' t' marry Singleton either."

"I'll do as I please about that, father; and if you are determined to make trouble I'll tell Jeff to discharge you at once," the girl retorted, and left him abruptly.

Ezra Childs gazed blankly after the trim figure of his daughter as she disappeared. For a moment his face softened, and then the old harsh, bitter look came back, and he stalked furiously toward the corrals. A few minutes later he was galloping rapidly toward the range where the special roundup which Jeff Singleton had ordered was just beginning.

It was to be a rapid-fire roundup with no other object in view than to get as accurate a count as possible of the cattle. All the extra men that could be spared from the ranch, as well as the regular riders, were engaged. The procedure was simple.

The men spread out to comb as much territory as possible. When the circle was completed and the cattle driven to a central point they were counted by Jeff, and turned back as far as possible so that they would not be gathered again.

Ed Haines had active charge of the men, but Jeff was alert to prevent crookedness. He did not disdain to forgive Lem Tooke, knowing that in his gratitude the man and his friends would be willing to report anything amiss that they might see.

He could find no fault with Haines, nor his two companions. Far and away they were the most capable men on the job, and apparently Haines was as anxious to have an accurate count as Jeff was himself. Montasano Steed and Gilly Moore were hard workers.

They had Jeff puzzled. If Lem Tooke was to be believed they had driven Pick and Ring cattle to Cardinal Buttes for the purpose of stealing them, and Ezra Childs was in collusion with them. The fact that the cattle were there indicated that Tooke was right. But even though they might be stealing Pick and Ring cattle it was no proof that they were stealing from their own outfit. Plenty of men would do that, he knew.

The roundup got along amazingly well after the first day. The fourth day it swung down along

a long drift fence that separated the Cross Anchor from the Pick and Ring range.

"This is leased land, so fences can be kep' up," Ed Haines explained.

"But I seen a dozen head o' Pick an' Rings in the last count," Ray Childs spoke up.

The boy had been Jeff's constant companion, and Jeff had given him the task of watching out for strays as the cattle strung through the lane of riders.

"We don't want them here," Jeff said. "Send a man over to Pickerings an' tell them they'd better have a couple of riders here to look after their stuff—just so neither of the Pickerings themselves come."

"I'll go," Ray offered. "I'd like tuh tell Gus Pickering that."

"By Gawd, I plumb forgot!" Haines exclaimed. "Yore dad was up here two days ago an' told me to send you home; that he had work fer yuh. He'd better go home, hadn't he?" he appealed to Jeff.

"Certainly," Jeff agreed, though he was wondering why Childs had come to the roundup without seeing him.

"An' bein' it's not far out of his road he'd just as well take that word around to Pickerings," Haines said carelessly.

"Sure," Ray said eagerly. "Please, Jeff?"

"Well, go ahead, but remember that's all you need to tell them," Jeff said meaningly.

Somehow he was reluctant to let the boy go, but he knew that both Ray and Mattie were in the habit of going there. It did not seem logical to make an objection.

They finished the count about two o'clock that afternoon, and after it was over Haines rode beside Jeff.

"See them rough lookin' hills over there? Well, there ain't been a critter in there this summer that I know of. It's the roughest country on the range, an' it'll take three-four days to comb it. Meantime this stuff we've counted may drift around to where we'll pick some of it up again. But it's up to you," he said.

Jeff pondered the problem several minutes before answering. In those very hills was the cabin where the human branding was done. He and Bilious had noticed the absence of cattle in their hasty ride through, but that was not conclusive. If there were cattle there he wanted to know it, but he also feared the other possibility that some of the cattle would get counted twice.

He saw Haines watching him quizzically, and in that moment he realized that if they were trying to fool him in any way this was the time and place.

"We'll have a look at that country anyway," he said with sudden determination. That way he would at least not be leaving anything undone.

"Right yuh are," Haines said. "We'll pull in there tonight."

That night Jeff was lonesome for the first time since coming to the Cross Anchor. He missed Ray's cheerful chatter, and he rather wished he had Bilious along also. He wondered where that eccentric character was, and rather suspected that Bilious was not far from the roundup. He had been decidedly lucky, he thought, to have fallen in with a man like Bilious, who had great ability and was not afraid.

He seemed unable to go to sleep, and somewhere around midnight he rolled out of his blankets, dressed himself and went for a walk.

It dawned upon him that he could not be far from where he had entered this labyrinth of canyons as a prisoner of Tub Pickering's. The same clouds seemed to float overhead; the same hills with their wavering undulating shadows gave it all an appearance of mystery and sublimity. Marching armies of billowy clouds paraded hurriedly past a chill looking moon. At every break in their ranks the shadows of the hills crept out and merged with seas of silvery light on the hillsides. Then, with

the face of the moon obscured, the whole region became for the moment a seething black caldron filled with dark and sinister shapes.

Jeff felt very small. The spell of that other night when he knew not what dreadful fate or ordeal confronted him, still seemed to linger. Things were different now. No threat of a hot iron was at his back; he had won the love of the girl he wanted; things were shaping themselves to his ends. And yet he felt dismayed and helpless.

With an effort to shake off the feeling of depression that had settled over him he turned back toward camp. He had proceeded not more than a hundred yards when he heard the sound of low, cautious voices ahead of him. He stopped abruptly and flattened himself against an overhanging shelf of dirt. He could not hear a word spoken, but he could see the dim outlines of four men apparently in earnest conference. It was impossible to identify any of them, and he could not get closer to them without being seen himself.

He turned back quickly and stealthily made his way out of sight of them. Then he made a wide detour to get back to camp from the other way and discover which men were missing. He had to fight his way through brush, and it took him longer to get back than he anticipated.

Huddled figures lay here and there, wherever a man could find a level place to stretch himself out. Jeff made the rounds and found just one bed empty. He went back to his own blankets determined to stay awake the remainder of the night if necessary to see who was missing.

He had waited perhaps nearly an hour when he heard stealthy footsteps approaching. Then a head popped around the corner of the mess wagon, and after a moment's deliberation the man walked rapidly toward the empty blankets. Jeff needed no second look to identify the fellow. It was Lem Tooke.

There was little use to speculate upon what Tooke had been up to, and Jeff was convinced that Lem was not one of the conspirators. He turned over and presently dropped asleep.

In the morning it was evident that Tooke had something he wanted to say to Jeff, but wherever the fellow went either Montasano Steed or Gilly Moore was by his side. And Ed Haines stuck close by Jeff. Breakfast was eaten by the dim light of dawn; then the horses were caught for the morning ride, and the riders swung into the hills.

Jeff rode over to Lem Tooke. "You stay with me today," he ordered. "I want you to look for strays like Ray did."

Ed Haines was within hearing distance. "Better watch him," he suggested. "He was out of his blankets a lot last night, an' he may go to sleep on yuh."

"I was out, too, for that matter—and I reckon there were others," Jeff retorted evenly.

Haines laughed and rode away, but Lem Tooke had turned pale.

"Well, what is it?" Jeff demanded when he and Lem were alone.

Tooke bit his lip. "Nothin', I guess," he gulped.

"You were out last night. You followed those three fellows, and they met a fourth man. Who was the other fellow?" Jeff insisted sternly.

"It was Ez Childs, but I didn't hear a word they said—honest t' Gawd I didn't," Tooke declared.

Jeff dropped into a moody silence. This was twice the foreman had surreptitiously visited the roundup, and conferred with the Haines crowd. What was his object?

There was no longer room to doubt that there was a criminal understanding between Childs and the Haines crowd. So far the only evidence secured pointed to them stealing Pick and Ring cattle. The trouble was that that supposition led to so many other confusing angles. What, then, had become of the missing Cross Anchor cattle?

Until that time Jeff had refused to admit the possibility of Childs being the culprit he sought, but now it had to be faced, and the prospect turned him cold. How would Mattie react to his getting evidence that would send her father to the penitentiary? He had promised her not to discharge her father, but it seemed certain that if he were not got out of the country he would surely come to grief.

For the first time he considered the probability of the Pickerings being innocent, and of Childs, Haines, Steed, and Moore being guilty of stealing cattle from both outfits, and also of their being the man branders. It was hard to believe that the father of the girl he was engaged to could be such an inhuman monster.

"Keep all this strictly under your hat," he told Lem Tooke.

"Sure I will," Tooke promised. "An' say, Jeff, when yuh fire Ez Childs as yuh'll have to sooner or later consider me fer his job, will yuh?"

"Yes," Jeff answered cryptically, "I'll consider you."

Two Pick and Ring men arrived at noon, Pliny and Bill Murphy. They gave Jeff a peculiar grin of greeting.

"I see they sent men who know the country here," Jeff said to them.

"Not so well as yuh might suppose," Pliny denied.

"Did Ray leave for home all right?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah, sure he did," was the reply.

Not an animal had been found all morning, but in the middle of the afternoon somebody jumped up a red three-year-old steer. Jeff happened to be close enough at hand to hear the rider's yell, and see the animal leave the brush and tear down the slope at a terrific pace.

Immediately a dozen riders were after it with wild whoops. But the steer seemed completely locoed and had the speed of a race horse. Straight through brush which a horse could not get through it plunged, and over rocky hillsides which would scare the most reckless rider. Once it plunged over a ledge and turned three somersaults before getting on its feet again, but it got up running.

"Give it up," Ed Haines yelled. "Yuh don't have tuh string a bunch o' that size to count it."

Jeff thought otherwise. He was well mounted that day, and in a mood for reckless riding. Fast as the steer was he knew that it would soon begin to tire, and he kept on. Several times he lost it in the brush, but it seemed not to have sense enough to stay concealed. The last time it came out of the brush where he had lost it, and ran alongside a

stony hillside at a swinging trot, blowing froth for yards at every breath.

Jeff's horse by now was badly winded, and dismounting Jeff jerked from the scabbard the carbine he had carried since the roundup began, and taking a swift, careful aim, fired. The steer dropped to its knees, then toppled over, and rolled over and over into a thick patch of brush nearly to the foot of the ridge.

Replacing the carbine Jeff made his way over to the carcass. He knew cattle well enough to know that the steer had gone mad from sheer loneliness. Evidently it had been left behind when some bunch had been driven out long before. It looked suspicious enough to justify his shooting it.

He had some difficulty getting his rope on to it where he could drag it out to inspect the brand, but finally he managed it despite the caginess of his horse, apparently made fractious by the smell of fresh blood.

It was a Pick and Ring steer; the brand was there on the ribs plain enough, but there was something about that brand which required a second look. An exultant feeling suddenly swept over Jeff. At last he had found the evidence he had been searching for. From the time he had accidentally found out that the Cross Anchor brand could be made

over into a Pick and Ring he had wanted to find a critter with the worked-over brand; and now he had found it under most favorable auspices.

He set to work immediately taking off the hide, and when he had the job completed and the inside of the hide exposed to view the Cross Anchor was perfectly outlined on the smooth surface. Thus:



But the marks that completed the Pick and Ring, being only lightly burned on, and recently at that, made no mark on this side. The Pickering brand when perfectly put on was like this:



But on the steer it resembled this:



No brand being ever quite true on a cow's hide the alteration would not be visible except upon close examination.

He rolled up the hide and carried it over to his snorting horse. The animal jumped about wildly, but Jeff had taken the precaution to tie it firmly. Jeff was reaching for the reins when something whined viciously past his head. An instant later he heard the report of a rifle from the thick brush below him.

With a lunge forward Jeff thrust the hide across his horse's neck, jerked the reins loose and flung himself into the saddle. Down went the horse's head as he went into a wild orgy of pitching to rid himself of his odious load. The hide came unwrapped and flapped madly in the breeze, but Jeff held on to it, and by superb riding ability managed to stick in the saddle until the frightened horse bucked his way through the brush and into an open

space where several of the riders had just arrived.

"You shore go a long way t' salvage a beef hide," Ed Haines remarked sarcastically, when the horse was quieted.

For a moment their eyes clashed. "Sometimes a hide is worth a lot of money," Jeff retorted.

He glanced around the circle of riders keenly. The two shots seemed to have drawn them all to the spot. One of those men, Jeff knew, had just tried to murder him, but whoever the would-be assassin was he was not betraying himself by any expression of excitement.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NIGHT WATCH

JEFF dismounted and rolled up the steer's hide again, making sure that no one saw the brand that was on it. He had first been minded to exhibit it to all the men, but that purposeful shot had changed his mind.

Then, too, there were Pick and Ring men present, and they might make a disturbance by claiming the hide.

"There isn't much use of wasting time in here," he said to Haines, "but put in the rest of the day and see what you can find. If you don't run across anything more you can move out in the morning. I'll see you to-morrow. Tooke can count anything you happen to find."

"Yuh leavin'?" Haines asked.

"Think I will. I want to go to the ranch, and this looks like a good time to get away." He turned his horse and rode off. As soon as he was out of sight of the men he speeded up. He had no wish to have anyone cut across and waylay him on the trail home.

Mattie came out to meet him as he rode up to the Cross Anchor ranch-house. She reached out her hands, but he held his own behind him. "Wait till I wash," he laughed. "I've been skinning a critter, and my hands are covered with blood."

"Couldn't you find anybody else to do that?" she pouted. "But you can kiss me, can't you?"

He found that to be no great ordeal.

"How are things going?" he asked her.

"Not like I hoped, Jeff. Dad is terribly angry, and says I shan't marry you. And he won't resign."

"I hope he won't need to resign, but he can't have his way about the other," Jeff said confidently. "Where is he now? I want to talk with him."

"I thought you had come to see me," Mattie complained laughingly.

"I did, honey, but I have a particular reason for wanting to see your father right away."

"Is—is it something new?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I've got positive proof that Pickerings have been stealing Cross Anchor cattle," he said. "It's on that beef hide there on my saddle."

"Oh!"

"This will convince your father that we have been losing cattle at any rate, and I want to make sure that this piece of evidence don't disappear. Inci-

dentially, I got this right close to where I got the things that did disappear."

"Then—Tub Pickering must be the man—the monster I should say. I—I'm so glad that——"

"I am too," Jeff cut in hastily. "There's still a few things that point to your father having retaliated against Pickering. If he will just be frank with me——"

"He doesn't like you, Jeff. Ever since I told him I was going to marry you he's been acting stranger than ever. Sometimes I think it isn't because he doesn't like you, either; but that someone has a hold on him," the girl worried.

"It's tough," Jeff admitted. "We'll all have to put our cards on the table. Where is he, did you say?"

"I don't just know," Mattie answered.

"Wonder if I can't send Ray after him?" he inquired.

"Ray? Where is he? Did he come with you?"

"Why, no, he came home yesterday—didn't he?"

"He hasn't been here." Mattie's eyes began to widen in alarm.

"That's funny," Jeff said, trying to speak casually. "He went over to Pickering's, but I understood their men to say he'd started home."

"Jeff! Ray would never stay all night at Picker-

ing's. If he didn't stay at camp, and didn't come home, what did become of him?"

"Now, Mattie, keep your head, dear. Nothing serious could have happened to him. He must have stayed at Pickering's place," Jeff asserted.

"Well, I'm going to find out," Mattie said with determination. "Just as fast as that car can get me there."

"You're not going alone," Jeff said swiftly, swinging in beside her.

The girl backed the car out of the garage, then stopped and contemplated Jeff wisely. "There were Pick and Ring riders there when you got this hide?" she demanded.

"Yes, but I'm not sure they saw the brand. In fact I don't think they did."

"I'll bet Tub Pickering knows about it right now," Mattie said positively. "If you go over there with me you'll get hurt."

"I'm minded not to let you go at all," he retorted. "If—if they have harmed Ray, they wouldn't be any gentler with his sister."

"But I've got to go—I've got to know," she declared.

"I think," Jeff said slowly, "we had better see your father about this. I think I see him coming now."

While they waited, the girl with fretful impatience, Jeff untied the steer hide from his saddle and spread it out on the ground. That was the first thing Ezra Childs noticed when he rode up.

"Where'd yuh git that?" he demanded.

"Took it from a steer I shot over in the Tumbling Hills," Jeff said. "You'll notice that it's a Cross Anchor animal with the brand changed to the Pick and Ring."

"What? That's impossible," Childs rumbled.

"There's the evidence—see for yourself," Jeff said, indicating the brand on the hairy side of the hide, and then flipping it over with the air of a showman displaying his wares.

"By Gawd!"

Jeff, watching the foreman critically, decided that Childs was either genuinely dumbfounded, or he was a good actor.

"Never mind about the hide or the stealing now," Mattie broke in impatiently. "Father, do you know that Ray is missing?"

"What?" Childs found occasion again to express his amazement.

Hurriedly the girl gave her reasons for thinking harm had befallen the boy.

"But nobody around here would really hurt anybody," Childs objected. "They might steal cattle,

but killing people, or kidnappin' would be different. They wouldn't do that."

"No?" Jeff drawled. "People have been branded on their backs with a hot iron, and that's not so much better."

"Bosh!" Childs declared.

"You saw the irons—and the picture," Jeff reminded. "I might say in passing," he added casually, "that somebody sent a bullet mighty close to my ear just after I skinned this steer."

"Jeff! Why didn't you tell me that?" Mattie cried, half reaching out for him impulsively. "If—if anything happens to you now I'll—I'll die."

"Bosh!" Childs roared again.

"If it's all bosh then go and find Ray," Mattie cried angrily.

"I'll do just that," Childs said emphatically. "Git out of that car. I'll have him back here in two hours."

"I'm going along," Mattie said firmly.

"And I," Jeff contributed.

"No. It won't do," Childs said more moderately. "I think I know what has happened, an' I know I can git the boy back home if I go alone. If either of you goes along I prob'ly can't. Fer Ray's sake yuh gotta stay here."

Jeff and Mattie looked at each other question-

ingly. This time there was no doubting his sincerity. He was obviously badly worried about the boy. Jeff was sure Mattie should not go, and she thought the same about him. Finally the girl got out of the car and her father drove away alone.

They watched the rapidly moving car until it disappeared in its own cloud of dust. Jeff found the girl suddenly in his arms.

"Jeff, dear, what if he doesn't—find—Ray?"

"I'll find him then," Jeff said. "I'll promise you that. If we have to take every man on the ranch to search we'll get him back."

"I've got lots of confidence in you, Jeff," Mattie murmured. "Strange, isn't it? I didn't have any at first. But I can't help being in this terrible suspense till I know Ray's all right. I wish father would hurry back."

Though they knew Childs could not yet have arrived at the Pickering ranch they could not help watching the road. They kept away from the house, not wishing to alarm Mrs. Childs until they knew it was absolutely necessary. That afternoon they were drawn very close together. Jeff hid the steer hide under some old hay in the loft of a barn, and after that they had nothing to do but wait for Childs' return.

Darkness came, and Childs had not returned.

Reluctantly they went into the house, and made some casual explanation of Childs' absence. To their relief Mrs. Childs did not suspect anything amiss, and after the supper dishes were washed and dried the young people went out and sat on the porch steps. From the bunkhouse came the tinkle of a guitar, occasional bursts of laughter, or a hoarse oath from some loser at cards. For the most part Jeff and Mattie sat in silence, and when they did speak it was in whispers.

"I can think of only one reason why anybody should want to hurt Ray," Jeff murmured at last. "He saw something here the other night that I'm afraid he was anxious to tell Gus Pickering. You know what it was, and you know better than I do how Pickering would take it."

"I've been afraid of the same thing," Mattie confessed. "Gus has always been different from his father. He wanted to marry me all right, and because my father seemed to want me to marry him, and because I thought it would end much of this trouble I perhaps gave him more encouragement than I should. But you understand, Jeff, I hadn't met you then."

Jeff embraced her tightly. "After all Pickering wouldn't dare to really harm the boy," he consoled.

"And he isn't that kind of a man anyway," Mattie

declared. But she recalled a tale Ray had once told her about boasts Gus had made. She had discounted it then, but now——

The sounds in the bunkhouse died away as the men went to bed. They heard the cook sawing steak for breakfast; presently his light went out, and the ranch seemed dead.

Suddenly they saw the glare of a headlight far down the road, and looking at his watch Jeff saw that it was a quarter past twelve.

When the car stopped they were there waiting for it. Ezra Childs was alone. Even in the moonlight the man's face looked haggard.

"Father, didn't you—" Mattie could go no further.

"No. He left the Pick an' Ring all right. I don't know where he is. Come on t' bed now, an' in the mornin' we'll decide what t' do," Childs said gruffly. He took his daughter by the arm and propelled her toward the house.

"That's good advice, I reckon," Jeff said when Mattie showed an inclination to struggle. "Good night," he added.

"Good night—dear," Mattie called.

A few minutes later Jeff followed them to the house and entered his room. For perhaps fifteen minutes he moved about the room restlessly, and

then he turned out the light, opened the door softly and went out. It was, he considered, a foolish thing to lose any more sleep; yet he remembered that already certain evidence he had secured had disappeared under most peculiar circumstances, and if Ezra Childs had had a hand in that it was not improbable that he would also try to find and destroy the incriminating beef hide.

The whole thing was only conjecture, but Jeff decided that it would be worth wasting a few hours' rest to find out. Accordingly he concealed himself in the shadows where he could see anyone coming from the house.

He had only a little over an hour to wait. Then he saw a man slinking out of the house and making his way toward the barnyards. He had avoided the beaten path and was coming where he would not be visible from Jeff's room. When the man drew closer Jeff knew it was Ezra Childs.

The foreman went directly to the long, low horse barns where the men usually kept their saddles. He was gone not longer than five minutes, and when he came out he went back to the house the way he had come.

He had not gone near the barn where the hide was concealed, and Jeff was puzzled. After some deliberation he got up and went into the barn.

Childs, he knew, had not gone there for nothing at all. He looked around curiously, and being unable to see anything clearly lighted a match. He shot a swift glance along the building by the flickering light, and as the match curled up and died he caught a flash of something white upon his own saddle. He stepped quickly over and drew an envelope from where it had been stuck through the fork of the saddle. He fingered it thoughtfully; then went to his room and lighted a lamp.

The envelope was sealed, but bore no address. Jeff ripped open the envelope and found a single sheet of none too clean writing paper upon which were a few lines of writing in awkward, plainly unnatural penmanship.

Singleton:

You know what happened to them other managers. We wont stop at that with you if you dont do what we say. You got to resign right now and keep yore mouth shut like the others. You got to lett Matt Childs alone. Thats all we ask. But if you don't heres what will happen—youll stop a bullett. And Ray Childs will be branded like them other managers was. Weve got him and we sure mean business. If you want to have the kid sent

home branded for life dont pay any attention to this.

(Signed) The Man Branders.

P. S. We'll slip a brand on the kids face as well as on his back. You got just three days to get out.

Jeff crumpled the paper in his hands with unspeakable loathing. Ezra Childs, the father of the girl he loved, had done this! Jeff did not believe for a moment that the boy would be harmed, but for a father to even intimate such a thing implied that the man was a monster—to say nothing of the agony which he was causing his daughter.

With a bleak smile on his face Jeff went to bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE PICK AND RING

I FOUND this on my saddle this morning," Jeff remarked coldly to Ezra Childs.

They had been out around the corrals in the early morning, and they were walking back to the house together after the breakfast call had been sounded.

"Yeah?" Childs' air of surprise was perfect. "What's it got to do with me?"

"Read it," Jeff said succinctly.

The man stopped to read the missive, and shrugged nervously under the penetrating battery of the other man's eyes.

"My Gawd—this—this is awful!" he exclaimed.

"What would you suggest?" Jeff asked.

"Suggest? Good God, man, you wouldn't have that happen to my boy for the sake of a job, would yuh?" Childs cried.

"No. I'd give up this job to keep that from happening to Ray. I like the boy."

Childs stuck out his hand impulsively, but Jeff ignored it.

"Giving up my job is one thing—giving up Mattie is another," Jeff said.

"Well, Mattie loves her brother enough that she'll give up you to save him," Childs retorted. "I'm goin' to show her this."

"Just a minute," Jeff ordered crisply. "Childs, *why did you do it?*"

"Do what?" Childs stopped, and his knees began to tremble.

"Why did you write this letter and leave it on my saddle last night?"

"Me? I never——"

"Don't lie to me, Childs, I watched you," Jeff said.

Childs' hand shot down toward the gun at his hip, but before he could start to draw, an iron grasp was about his wrist, holding him powerless.

"Nothing like that, Childs," Jeff warned. "I've got you, you see, so you had just as well realize that the game is up. I'll accept your resignation, and allow you to move away in peace, but only on condition that you leave Mattie alone. That's pretty liberal treatment, too."

"Gawd, you don't understand!" Childs croaked. "They'll—they'll brand my boy—just like they said—if you ain't got rid of. Singleton, for God's sake don't let them do that!"

"Why try to bluff?" Jeff sneered. "I know that you plotted this whole thing to get rid of me. The boy is in no danger."

"No danger? If you knew the Pickerings like I do you wouldn't say that. Man, they'll mark him; they'll disfigure him for life if you don't go. Do you think I'd put my little boy in the hands of those fiends—willingly?"

The foreman's voice rose almost to a scream, and Jeff's positive opinion began to waver. The evidence against Childs was complete, yet his concern for his son seemed genuine.

"Don't shout, Childs," Jeff cautioned. "You and me must go some place right now and talk this thing over alone. I don't want to alarm your family, but you have got to come clean."

They turned back toward the corrals, and Jeff led the man to a place where he knew they could not possibly be overheard.

"Now then I want the whole truth about this affair," Jeff said firmly. "Better begin by telling me what you meant by having Ed Haines and his friends drive those Pick and Ring cattle over to Cardinal Buttes that time."

"I don't know nothin' about that," the foreman said sulkily.

"Tooke overheard Haines tell you the cattle were there before we ever went there to see. There was plenty of collateral evidence besides," Jeff said relentlessly.

"I won't answer. You can fire me if yuh want, an' put me in the pen if yuh can, but I'm damned if I'll help yuh do it," Childs raged.

"I don't want to do either one, though the first seems necessary; but I must have the truth. I'm thinking of your family first of all."

"Help me get my boy back then before they carry out their threats against him," Childs retorted sullenly.

"I can understand your obstinacy, but it won't get you anywhere," Jeff said angrily.

"Then listen to me," Childs said jerkily. "I did put that letter on yore saddle, but I didn't write it. When I went after my boy I found out they'd hid him somewhere. Their terms fer gittin' him back was gittin' rid o' you. If I don't they'll do what they threatened. They wrote that letter, an' I brung it home. I'll tell yuh t' yore face right now that I'd gladly kill yuh t' have my boy back safe."

At last Childs' words carried conviction, and Jeff's heart sank as he realized that young Ray Childs really was in terrible danger. Other things sank

into insignificance beside that one outstanding fact.

"Who wrote that letter?" Jeff demanded.

"Gus Pickering. He's goin' to marry Mattie, an' when Ray told him you had cut him out he took that means of gittin' rid of you."

Jeff considered the matter a minute or so. "It's a bluff," he said finally. "We'll go to Salina today, put this matter before the district attorney and get the sheriff to come back and arrest the Pickerings. They'll never dare try any branding of the boy when they know they'll have to face a court."

"I know better. The sheriff could never git 'em, an' I'll deny everything if I have t' go to town. The only way to save the boy is to do like they want—an' for Mattie to go marry Gus Pickering at once."

"You'd have her do that?" Jeff's tone expressed unutterable contempt.

"To save my boy, yes."

Jeff clinched his fists. It was hard work to keep his hands off the man.

"Matt's got to marry Gus before they'll give Ray up," Childs retorted. "Gawd! I don't want to play their game, but I know how things stand an' you don't!" he burst out.

"You are willing to sacrifice one child to save another—and yourself," Jeff charged.

He felt utterly helpless. Without Childs' co-operation there was no use seeking the help of the law, and in his heart he feared that the Pickerings in their feeling of security would not hesitate to do the things they threatened. That they would try to kill him went without saying, but that was a chance to be disregarded, because it had to be faced.

"All right," he surrendered. A look of elation crossed Childs's face. "I'll have to play a lone hand I see, and you can play yours as you see fit. But I'm not resigning."

The look on Childs' face disappeared as though wiped away with a rag.

"You mean—" he faltered.

"I mean that I'm going to see this thing through to a finish regardless of who it hurts. I'm going to try to save Ray and Mattie if I can, but that don't extend to you." He reached out and repossessed himself of the letter which had been fluttering in Childs' hands.

"I'm fired, am I?" Childs inquired.

"You are."

"All right then, damn you, I kin fight you in the open—an' yuh'll never marry my girl!"

The man turned and strode back to the house, and Jeff made his way to the shack where the men ate. After this he could not eat at Childs' table,

even though he had the authority to take possession there if he wished.

Jeff was entirely without appetite that morning. He killed time in the cook-shack until he saw Childs leave the ranchhouse. The man was followed by Mattie, and the girl was dressed for traveling. They walked out to the garage, but before they could start the engine Jeff joined them.

"I'd like to talk with you alone, Mattie," he begged.

"She's not workin' fer you now, an' I forbid her talkin' to yuh," Childs growled.

"Mattie, I can't let you do anything rash," Jeff addressed the girl. "I suppose your father has told you of the threats the Pickerings have made. Your father has taken an attitude which makes it impossible for us to work together, but if you'll trust me I'll get Ray home safely."

"I can't trust anyone to save Ray but myself," Mattie said. "Father says you could have saved him, but you wouldn't."

"Not his way—letting the thieves run this ranch, and giving you up, but——"

"Ray is my only brother. Before I'd let him be mutilated by those fiends I'd do anything—anything."

She stepped into the car and took the wheel, but

before she could put her foot on the starter or turn on the switch Jeff grasped her gently by the arm.

"I'm sorry, Mattie; but I'll have to use this car," he said.

"What? You'd try to put me out—by force?"

"If necessary. The car is company property, and I have use for it."

Not once had Jeff taken his eye off Ezra Childs. The ex-foreman carried a gun, and he had given ample warning already that he would use it at the first opportunity. Therefore, Jeff was giving him no chance.

"It's a despicable, petty action, and it will do you no good," Mattie flamed.

"I'd let you have it in a minute, Mattie, for any other purpose than to sacrifice yourself, but I can't permit that," he told her regretfully.

Mattie shook his hand from her arm, and got out of the car. "We'll go on horseback, Dad," she said. "We own some horses at any rate."

Jeff bowed, and allowed them to go toward the horse corral. While they were roping their horses—Mattie could use a rope as well as any man—he went back to the bunkhouse where most of the ranch hands still on the place were collected.

"Boys," he said, "I'm going over to the Pick and Ring Ranch. Things have come to a head, and

there's liable to be trouble. Will any of you volunteer to get your guns and come along?"

Not a man stirred.

"We're paid t' work an' not t' fight," one man drawled at last.

"Right!" Jeff snapped.

He got his rifle and an ample supply of ammunition for both it and his six-shooter, and after a moment's hesitation he threw in the single-barreled shot-gun he had carried on one occasion. Then he got into the car and headed for the Pick and Ring ranch. He took a little used road for a short distance to avoid passing Mattie and her father.

He was five or six miles along the road when he saw six horsemen approaching on a trail that led into the main road. Recognizing some of the horses he stopped the car and waited. Lem Tooke was at their head.

"Haines told us the roundup was over, an' we could beat it," Lem stated.

These were the men who had gone from the ranch as extra hands. None of the regular punchers were with them.

"He did, eh?" Jeff mused. "You boys have all got guns. I want you to follow me to the Pick and Ring ranch. They've got Ray Childs there and if we don't get him away from them they intend to

brand him with a hot iron, and otherwise mutilate him. We've got to stop it."

"But, my Gawd, Jeff, there ain't enough of us!" Lem blurted.

"All right, if you're cowards go on home. But every man that turns back gets his time," Jeff snapped, and started the car.

He looked back once and saw them still in consultation. Topping a ridge farther on he glanced back and saw them slowly following him, but it seemed to be a half-hearted effort.

Jeff drove through Pickering's gate, and on up to the ranch-house. He had driven with one eye on the road and the other on the alert for a sight of a gun-barrel poked from behind some hiding-place, but nothing happened until he stopped the car and tooted the horn. Then Tub Pickering and his son came out of the house and over to the car.

"Well," Jeff challenged abruptly, "I got your letter this morning."

"Yuh got—what?" old Tub demanded.

Jeff noticed that Gus' eyes had narrowed.

"I came after the boy," Jeff said shortly. "I caught Childs putting the letter on my saddle, and made him come clean. I suppose you know that I killed a steer yesterday with your brand worked over ours. To cut it short your game is finished.

I'd advise that you don't add kidnapping to your other crimes."

"By Gawd!" old Tub bellowed, "I can't stand this. When will you damn' fool managers over there ever learn anything?"

He seemed about to attack the occupant of the car, but once again his son opposed him.

"Let him rant, Dad," Gus said. "We know he ain't got nothin' on us."

"But I'll have somethin' on him," Tub roared. "This bird's got more damn' crust than the rest of 'em."

"I've got plenty of crust," Jeff agreed. "The question is are you going to try to hold Ray Childs a prisoner now we've got the evidence against you, or are you going to give him up? If you don't I'll promise you right now that you won't get any mercy."

"Is he crazy?" old Tub demanded of his son.

"Plumb nuts," Gus said. He started to move around the car, but Jeff stopped him.

"Stay where you are," Jeff rasped, and they found themselves covered by a gun.

"Don't so much as move a finger, either one of you, till my men come," Jeff added. To his great advantage the six horsemen now suddenly appeared over a bit of high ground a couple of miles

away, and it seemed that the Pick and Ring men were all away at work somewhere.

Then to Jeff's disgust he saw two more men just riding up to the gate ahead of his own men, and these men came on at a much faster pace than his own half-hearted crew. Something had to be done at once. At the moment the thought uppermost in his mind was to keep Mattie from meeting Gus Pickering.

"Get in here, Gus," he ordered suddenly. "You're going with me."

"Like hell," Gus sneered. The sneer suddenly froze on his face, as the gun-barrel revolved toward him until its black muzzle looked him threateningly in the eye.

"I'm cornered," Jeff admitted. "My only way out is to shoot you or take you with me, and I don't much care which it is."

There was no mistaking his desperation, and his gun promised death. Slowly Gus's foot struck the running board.

Then Tub Pickering sprang.

Swiftly Jeff shifted the direction of his aim and pulled the trigger. Coincident with the report of the gun Gus Pickering's hand reached out like a striking snake and seized Jeff's wrist. Twice Jeff managed to pull the trigger, but the shots went

wild. Then Gus had swarmed into the car on top of him.

Jeff had presence of mind enough to reach back behind him and unfasten the car door. As Gus landed upon him he went over backward through the opened door, and by a desperate effort threw Gus clear over his head.

Both men struck the ground with much force, but they were still entangled, and in a moment they were fighting like wildcats. Jeff was a fighter, and with no little scientific training to back him up; but he needed all that and more to hold his own with his heavier, stronger opponent.

It was a terrific battle while it lasted, with both men giving out and absorbing great punishment. Young Pickering was clearly astounded by his foe's ability, and this was a help to Jeff since he was able to land some most telling blows before Gus really began to extend himself. And Jeff was sustained by a firm belief that his antagonist had a yellow streak.

The clothes of both men hung in shreds, and they were bleeding profusely, when Bill Murphy and Pliny rode up. The two punchers gazed at the spectacle a moment in awed amazement. Neither of them had any desire to take a hand-to-hand part in this titanic encounter. Then Pliny was seized

with an inspiration and he took down his rope. As the combatants fell apart for a moment the rope swished through the air and landed around Jeff's body, pinning his arms to his sides as Pliny took his dallies and pulled up the slack.

Then Gus Pickering took careful aim, drew back his right fist, and let go with a swing that knocked Jeff cold and all but dislocated his neck.

It was a world full of discordant noises which Jeff woke up to, and it was some time before he realized that most of the noises were inside his own head.

"Brother, that was some wallop yuh absorbed a while ago," remarked a voice close at hand. "Still listenin' tuh the birdies?"

With an effort Jeff rolled over and rested his eyes upon the ugly but not unkind features of Pliny. Jeff shook his head, and that set the bells to ringing again. But after a time he was able to sit up and look around, and then he discovered that he was right where he had fallen. Pliny's rope lay on the ground beside him.

"Did—did my men come?" he asked.

"You shoulda seen 'em leanin' the other way when the shootin' started," Pliny laughed.

"Where is Tub Pickering? I think I shot him."

"We carried him in the house. Yuh shouldn't have shot the old man." Pliny suddenly lowered

his voice. "If yuh had tuh shoot anybody yuh'd orta shot that damn' Gus."

"It's a mistake I'll rectify if I ever get the chance," Jeff said dryly. "Where is he?"

"Gone away. Wanted tuh kill yuh before he went, but old Tub wouldn't listen to it. An', brother, if I was you I'd be startin' hence before he returns. Tub is in a bad way, an' Gus won't be easy tuh handle without him," Pliny advised, which advice told Jeff one fact.

He was not a prisoner! That was the most astounding thing of all to Jeff. He got unsteadily to his feet and walked over to the car. His six-shooter was lying upon the seat. The rifle and shotgun had not been disturbed. Mechanically he put the gun in the holster, got in and started the car. He was getting off lucky, he realized; but he had accomplished nothing.

He killed the engine and got out. "I'm going to look around for Ray Childs," he declared.

"The kid ain't here," Pliny said. "Gus has been hidin' him. I heard that much when Gus an' the old man was talkin', an' my guess is Gus has gone there."

"Where?" Jeff asked quickly.

"I dunno, stranger. I'm only a poor puncher tryin' tuh git along in the world. But if I was

lookin' for Gus myself I'd go tuh that town o' Desolation an' wait fer him," Pliny said.

"Can I get there with a car?"

"It might be done. There's two roads; one direct over the mountains, the other by way of the Dirty Devil. I doubt if a car has been over either, but wagons have. The Dirty Devil is the longer way, but the best, I reckon."

It might be all deceit, Jeff was conscious of that; yet Pliny certainly seemed friendly. It occurred to him that it was possible to follow the man's advice without letting him know it. He could return to the ranch and start from there.

"It don't sound good to me," he said, and once more started the car.

He met Mattie and her father along the road and stopped to talk with them. The girl's eyes reflected her alarm when she saw his disheveled appearance.

"Jeff, are you hurt?" she asked solicitously.

"Not seriously," he grinned. "Mattie, your brother isn't here, and neither is Gus Pickering. I think I know where to find them, and I'm going after Ray. You had just as well get in the car with me and come home."

For a moment the girl looked undecided; then her father spoke up.

"No. You come on with me. This feller can't

do nothin' for Ray, an' I know it. You an' me are the only ones can save him."

"Please wait at the ranch until I get back, Jeff?" the girl pleaded.

"Will you promise to come back right away?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll wait," Jeff promised.

They rode on, but Jeff did not go far. He turned the car around and followed them slowly back as far as he could without getting in sight of the Pickering ranch. Then he stopped and waited.

Nearly an hour had passed and he was growing more and more anxious. Then he saw a single horseman jogging along parallel to the road to the Cross Anchor. Something about that slouching figure looked familiar. Then he recognized it and loudly honked his horn.

The rider gave a start, looked in that direction, and then came loping down.

Jeff had never seen a more welcome sight than Bilious Burket was at that moment.

CHAPTER XIX

A NIGHT EMIGRATION

DID the car buck yuh off, or has a wildcat been ridin' with yuh?" Bilious queried as he rode up.

"Had a mix-up with Gus Pickering," Jeff answered briefly, not being in a mood for joking.

"Did he hit yuh hard enough tuh kill yore engine?" Bilious asked with a quizzical glance at the car. It was a peculiar place to stop.

"He knocked me out and got away," Jeff confessed. "Mattie and her father are over there now, and I promised to wait. Have you found out anything?"

"Not much. I been sorta hangin' behind yore whoop-up tuh see if there was any crooked business bein' pulled afterward, but I got to admit I ain't seen a thing suspicious."

"Have you seen anything of Ray Childs?"

"Nope. Why?"

Hastily Jeff sketched over all that had happened since he had seen Bilious last. The puncher listened attentively, and his expression changed from wonderment to anger as the tale unfolded.

"Well, yuh shore been a heap more active than I've been," Bilious said regretfully. "The fact is, Jeff, I ain't done a damn' thing the whole time—unless it might be this mornin'." He stopped broodingly.

"This morning? What was it?" Jeff asked eagerly.

"It wasn't much," Bilious hastened to say. "Only this mornin' I topped a pinnacle tuh see whereabouts yore roundup was goin', an' I noticed a general split-up. One bunch took fer the Cross Anchor, another one or two took off tuh the range, two men headed fer this ranch, an' three men rode toward the Pick an' Ring range.

"I follered the three, mostly because one of 'em that I've seen at a distance several times kinda haunts my mem'ry. I don't know who he is, but I got a sneakin' idee I'd know him if I seen him close. I trailed along far enough tuh be reasonably shore they was headin' fer a cabin I've noticed over here in the foothills. Then another bird come poundin' along hellity-split from this ranch an' sorta cut me off. I decided I'd ride back tuh the ranch an' find out why the whoop-up was abandoned so all of a sudden, figgerin' I could investigate this here cabin some other time. Couldn't

think it was hardly seasonable with three or four tough hombres hangin' out there."

"Bilious," Jeff said excitedly, "that cabin is where they're holding Ray. Can I get there with this car?"

"No, not half."

"Oh, Lord," Jeff groaned. "If we wait to git another horse it may be too late."

"I'll go see what I can find out," Bilious offered.

"Not alone," Jeff vetoed. "Will that horse of yours carry double?" he asked presently.

"We kin make him."

Hastily Jeff wrote a note on a page torn from his memorandum book and left it in the seat of the car.

"Mattie," he wrote, "I think I know where Ray is, and I have gone after him. Go on home and don't worry."

Then he climbed on behind Bilious. The outraged saddle horse attempted to pitch, but Bilious restricted it to a few futile sheep jumps, and then they were on their way.

The cabin which Bilious had located was farther away than Jeff figured. The overburdened horse was white with lather before Bilious finally stopped and announced that the place was not far ahead.

"I don't reckon we'd better ride right up there

like we was goin' tuh Sunday School," Bilious opined. "We can hide our horse here, an' kinda glide in ourselves through the brush."

Jeff agreed that it was a splendid idea, and they made their approach accordingly. Was this another cabin of horrors, Jeff wondered? They were taking no chances, and both men gripped the handles of their guns as they went.

Suddenly Bilious stepped out into the open a few rods from the cabin. "Nobody here," he said disgustedly.

They walked up to the door of the cabin and inspected it. It was fastened shut by a chain and a heavy padlock; the windows also were barred from the outside.

They peered through the heavy bars on the windows, and could see a room scantily furnished, but with signs of recent occupancy. Then they found a pole to use as a battering ram, and soon had the door demolished.

Soiled playing cards lay upon the table as they had been left from a half finished game of solitaire. There was some food in a grub box, and the stove was still warm.

"Our birds have flew the coop," Bilious said mournfully.

Jeff, however, was not satisfied. "If Ray was

held here there should be some sign of it, and I'm going to turn this shack upside down to look for it," he announced.

"An' I'll improve the shinin' moments by cookin' up a bite o' grub," Bilious volunteered.

The meal was nearly cooked, and Jeff was about to give up in discouragement when an exclamation from Bilious drew his attention.

"Peculiar marks on the end of this here wood box," Bilious stated, as he straightened up with a stick of wood in his hand.

Stepping quickly over Jeff knelt and discovered writing traced on the end of the wood box apparently with the charred end of a burned stick. And it was equally evident that the stick had been recharred a number of times. The writing was not plain, but it was readable.

Gus Pickering is keeping me locked up here till my sister Mattie agrees to marry him. I hope she won't because he's a big bag of wind and don't dare to hurt me. If anybody sees this before I get home tell Mattie to marry Jeff and tell Gus to go to hell. I'm not much scared.

Ray Childs

P. S. This is the only place I can write this where Gus won't see it.

The men looked at each other questioningly.

"The trail got too hot for him an' he's moved the kid," Bilius remarked.

"What about those other three men you saw coming here?" Jeff asked. In his mind he was sure he knew who those three men were, but he did not know their intentions.

"They want tuh git rid o' yuh, Jeff, so they can keep on lootin' the Cross Anchor. That's the game they've been playin' all along—not lettin' a manager git set long enough tuh interfere with their game. That's at the bottom of this whole play, an' the gal business is just incidental. They intend to run you out or kill yuh," Bilius declared with positive conviction.

Swiftly Jeff pieced things together as they might have happened since he had discovered the steer with the worked-over brand. That was something the rustlers had not expected, and the attempt to kill him having failed they had resolved to take drastic steps to get him out of the way before anything else was uncovered.

Childs had taken the word to the Pickering ranch that night, and brought back the letter which Jeff had found on his saddle. Then Jeff himself had warned the Pickerings that he knew the authorship of the letter, and after he was knocked out Gus had

come on to the cabin, met Haines, Steed, and Moore there, and taken the boy elsewhere.

Had they taken the boy to the town of Desolation as the man Pliny had intimated? Would Haines and his men go along or would they go back to work at the Cross Anchor and continue their bluff as honest working men?

"Grub pile!" interrupted Bilious, as he dexterously poured out the coffee.

"I'm stumped, Bilious," Jeff confessed. "I seem to have it all figured out, and then there is some little thing comes up that unsettles the whole thing. If I could only know where Ez Childs and Tub Pickering fit into this thing I could work better. But they've got me cross hitched."

"There's one thing I'm dead sure of," Bilious spoke up seriously. "That is, that the kid won't be harmed."

"My God, I wish I was sure of that," Jeff said.

"Look at it reasonable. Men don't do that sort o' things unless they're damn' badly cornered. The kid is valuable to 'em so long as they can threaten tuh do that, but after they've done it he loses his value to 'em. As long as they can keep him out o' sight an' make threats they've got the whip hand, but if they ever fulfill them threats they're done."

Jeff realized that there was logic in Bilious' argu-

ment, and he was sure that the boy would be mutilated only as a last resort by his abductors, but the photograph of the branded man he had seen was still vividly in his mind. And he knew that logic alone would not soothe Mattie, or the boy's mother, so long as Ray was away from them.

"How far is it to your camp?" Jeff asked.

"Eight or ten miles I should say."

"You've got two extra horses there."

"An' a pack saddle," Bilious grinned. "Wanna ride it?"

"Do you suppose you could take your outfit and get to Desolation by the time Gus Pickering does—assuming that he has gone there?"

"I won't be far behind. Desolation is a tough place—the worst I know of—but it ain't likely Gus would ride in there with the boy found an' gagged till he lays his wires."

"All right," Jeff said decisively. "Do that, and see what you can find out, but don't take any chances unless it's absolutely necessary. If I can't find out anything, or do anything here, I'll go down there and meet you."

"An' how'll yuh git back tuh the Cross Anchor?" Bilious queried.

"Walk—to the car," Jeff said evenly.

"If I was a hog fer punishment I'd say 'take

my horse', but bein' a normal man with corns on my feet I'll just say I hope the car is still there," Bilious remarked.

"You'll need your horse," Jeff said.

Outwardly at least it was a badly wrecked human being that limped into the road several hours later and looked for the car. All day Jeff had suffered from a headache as a result of his knockout at the hands of Gus Pickering, and the bruises from that conflict gave discomfort to other parts of his body. Riding behind Bilious on a rebellious horse had inflicted still further injuries, and the crowning hurts and pains, if the term could be applied in a reverse manner, came from a pair of badly blistered feet.

To make the tragedy complete the car was not there.

Long after the last light had been extinguished at the Cross Anchor its young manager reeled up to the bunkhouse door. He had noticed that the car was in the garage, and this implied that Mattie and her father had returned in safety. But in order to make sure, he roused Lem Tooke and asked the fellow who it was that had brought the car home.

Tooke sat up in bed and shook his head several times as though there was something wrong with

his eyes. "My Gawd, what happened to yuh?" he demanded.

"Answer my question," Jeff rasped.

"I think—lemme see—yes, Matt was drivin' the car, an' Ez come along afterward with the horses."

Satisfied that Mattie was all right Jeff washed up as best he could and went to bed.

He was awakened by the noise of the men in the bunkhouse, and as he rolled over he barely repressed a yowl of pain. Every muscle in his body seemed to have an acute ache of its own whenever he moved. He lay quiet for a few minutes trying to smooth out some of the kinks in his body, and then he stepped out gingerly on the floor and dressed.

The cook was swearing at the last stragglers in to breakfast by that time, and Jeff sat down at the table and ate with them. He decided then it was time to go over and talk with Mattie. He had put on fresh clothes, and save for a discolored eye, and a bruised place on his jaw he was fairly presentable.

Seeing nothing of any of the Childs family around the yard he went up and knocked on the dining-room door, but got no reply. He opened the door presently and went in, and the unoccupied impression of the room gave him a shock. He called out,

and when there was no answer he went hastily from room to room. Without question it was thoroughly deserted.

He rushed out and questioned the men, but none of them knew anything about the movements of the Childs family. They had been there the night before; that was all they knew.

A checking up over the ranch revealed that a buckboard and a team of horses, as well as two saddle horses, all belonging to Childs personally, were missing.

Jeff saddled the best horse on the ranch, a big bay called Red Top, and started out to follow the tracks of the buckboard. He had not got outside the ranch when he met one of the riders from the Cross Anchor cow camp, a young fellow named Jack Fulton, to whom Jeff had taken a liking the first few days of the roundup.

"Boss, I've mebbe not used good judgment, but I thought I'd better ride in an' find out what yuh wanted done," the puncher said a bit nervously. "The roundup breakin' off in the middle the way it did, an' Ed Haines quittin' us too, kinda put us boys up against it. Childs ain't been around, either, an' we don't know what tuh do."

"You say Haines has gone?" Jeff queried.

"Yep; him an Montasano an' Gilly all left yes-

terday. Things are kinda funny around here, Mr. Singleton."

"They are," Jeff agreed. "Now you go back to camp an' take charge. Just do the usual things—line riding and all that, till you hear from me again."

"All right," Fulton said. "I'll do my best."

"You don't know where Haines and the others went?" Jeff thought to ask.

"No, I don't; but I do know they had a kind of a row yesterday among themselves, though they all went away together."

Here was another angle, but Jeff did not long dwell upon the possibility of trouble between the three men who seemed to have a large hand in the troubles of the Cross Anchor. He rode on, and soon discovered that the buckboard was going to the Pickering ranch.

He remembered then that he had cut across through the fields the night before, and, had he followed the road he would doubtless have met the Childs family on their way. Why they had gone back to Pickerings was beyond him, but he could see little use in going there again to argue with them. With her father and mother Mattie would be safe enough, he felt. The danger was that they might persuade her to marry Gus Pickering, but

they could not do that until Ray was recovered, and he felt sure that Ray had been taken to Desolation.

Indeed, all trails seemed now to point to the desert town, and he decided to go there himself without further delay.

CHAPTER XX

BILIOUS MEETS HIS MAN

THE town of Desolation lay sprawled squalidly at the foot of the one small hill in its immediate vicinity, as though to seek what protection it could from the barren flatness of the surrounding desert of the same name.

In winter time, with the tops of the distant mountains covered with snow, and the desert itself often harboring thousands of cattle roaming here and there in small bunches, drinking from the tanks and potholes, and subsisting upon the dry grass that somehow came to life with the fall rains, the place was not so bad.

Hardy cowpunchers in chaps and leather vests were nearly always present to give the town some life. Ranchers from isolated ranges in the inaccessible regions through which ran the turbulent Dirty Devil often came here to trade, preferring to pay the tribute exacted by the freighters and merchants who made Desolation their headquarters than to send their own teams over the long road to the railroad.

In midsummer it was different. The town seemed as dead as the surrounding country. A haze of shimmering heat hung over the town like a blanket. Most of the freighters had taken their teams out to the Sanpete or Sevier valleys to work for the farmers there during the excessively hot weather. The permanent inhabitants of the town stayed indoors except when compelled to come out by sheer necessity.

So it was that no one was in sight when Bilious Burket rode up one afternoon and tied his three horses to a hitch rack in front of The Fair Store, Ab Whitehead, Proprietor. Everything about the huddled cluster of buildings, from the window display in the Fair Store to the garbage pile back of "Slim's Restaurant," was familiar to Bilious, though it had been over three years since he visited the place.

As he entered the store Ab Whitehead himself came forward to meet him with a smirk. Except that the man's poll was a trifle balder the man had not changed. The same cold, calculating eye was in evidence. No one knew how much money Whitehead possessed, but it was supposed to be considerable, and his reputation was not too savory.

"Well, if it ain't my old friend Bilious from Cabin Creek," the merchant said with false, unctu-

ous cordiality. "Ain't seen you for years. How are you anyway?"

"Able tuh ooze around some yit," Bilious responded as he shook the man's lifeless hand.

"Still workin' for Rube Fellows?"

"Nope." Bilious knew the merchant was fully aware that he had not been working for Fellows.

"I'm lookin' fer a big young feller named Gus Pickering, from Horse Valley," he went on. "Seen anything of him lately?"

Whitehead's eyes narrowed perceptibly, and his lips pursed together; a sure sign to Bilious that he meant to conceal something. "Ain't seen a thing of him," he denied.

Bilious knew by that sign Gus had arrived ahead of him.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I'll put up my horses an' git me a room."

"Waitin' till he comes?" Whitehead asked.

"Shore."

Half an hour later Bilious crossed over to Slim's Restaurant and ordered a meal. Slim also knew him, but he made no such demonstration as the merchant had; merely grunting a greeting and asking what he would have.

"How long since Gus Pickering was in here?" Bilious asked.

"Don't know him," Slim replied shortly.

Bilious gave a description of the young rancher, but Slim only shook his head.

"Whitehead told me he'd been over here," Bilious lied calmly.

"Well, this ain't such a big town yuh can't find a feller if he's in it," Slim said.

"I know. But I was just wonderin' if he'd left town or not."

"I think he did," Slim answered.

"About what time?" Bilious asked with a grin.

"I dunno." Slim snarled as he realized that he had been tricked into an admission. "I seen him outfittin' over to Whitehead's store before noon."

Bilious finished his meal in silence. He felt that he had learned all he could. Young Pickering had obtained a grub supply and was camping out somewhere with the Childs boy. No one in Desolation would tell him which way he had gone, and it would be a waste of time to search for him. The only thing to do was to wait right there until Gus came in again, or until someone else appeared who might know where Gus was.

He spent the remainder of the day in a saloon owned by Ab Whitehead. There was very little business, the cash customers apparently not having life enough even to get drunk. Bilious knew most

of them, but as his outfit never had been popular in Desolation the greetings he received were indolently cool.

He chatted a bit with Sandy Grott, the bartender, and then retired to a chair in the rear of the room, pulled his hat over his eyes and began to play solitaire with a deck of cards he had just purchased.

In the twilight, just before the lamps were lighted, Bilious found it hard to identify two men who entered the saloon and walked up to the bar with a clanking of spur chains and dragging rowels over the board floor. Still there was something oddly familiar about them. They ordered a drink, and Bilious wondered why Grott did not light up.

"Boys want yuh to come up an' have a drink, Bilious," Sandy called.

Slowly Bilious arose, wondering why the invitation had not come directly. As he approached the bar the men fell apart so that he was flanked on either side. And then he recognized them, and realized why the room had been left in semi-darkness.

"Bahr!" he ejaculated. Here, almost at the starting place of his three-year search, was the man he had been hunting for with murder in his heart. He scarcely glanced at the other man, yet realized dimly that he had seen the fellow at the Cross Anchor.

At that moment Gilly Moore the puncher meant little to him.

He was caught flat-footed as it were. He was between the two men and their hands caressed the handles of their guns.

"My name's Montasano Steed now, Bilious, an' I've been told that yuh've been lookin' fer me fer quite some time," remarked the man whom Bilious had known as Arnold Bahr, the betrayer of Marie Bullivant.

At the first hostile move he should make Bilious knew they would get him. And he suddenly realized that he had promised Marie not to harm the man. With an effort he choked back the words that were rising to his tongue.

"I *was* lookin' for yuh, Bahr," he said in a strained, unnatural voice. "I looked for yuh tuh kill yuh fer three years. I'm damned sorry I didn't find yuh then, but the other day I promised Marie not tuh harm yuh on account o' the kid."

The sneering smile suddenly faded from Montasano Steed's face.

"The kid? What d'ye mean—kid?"

"Yore kid," Bilious rasped.

"Yuh mean Marie's got a kid? By God, Gilly, think o' that—I'm a daddy!" His expression changed abruptly. "Yuh're lyin', because yuh know

I've got yuh. Marie is dead. Her an' her old man was washed away in a flood long ago."

Bilious realized how those loyal people in Cabin Creek Basin had shielded the unfortunate girl and her equally unfortunate grandfather. Even the prying gossips of Desolation had not obtained their secret.

"Git me if yuh want to—an' if yuh can—but Marie is alive an' happy," he said stubbornly.

There were plainly doubts in Steed's mind, and there was, besides, an almost overmastering curiosity about this unexpected news. From the moment when he had accidentally seen Bilious Burket at the Pick and Ring ranch without being seen himself, and had learned that Bilious was the man who was suspected of being a range detective he had determined to get him at the first opportunity. That opportunity had seemed ripe when he learned from Ab Whitehead that Bilious was in the saloon. But he wanted to know where Marie and this unexpected son of his were if they could really be alive.

For sufficient reasons he had not returned to Cabin Creek Basin or its immediate vicinity, and had accepted rumor as to the fate of the girl he had deserted.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"I'll never tell yuh. She won't be bothered with you again," Bilious declared.

"Won't she? Well, I don't know—if this yarn happens tuh be the truth. If I got a kid I sorta want tuh see it."

"Yuh won't have time. The sheriff's posse will be here too quick," Bilious said.

"Yeah?" Steed sneered; yet his tone was not altogether confident.

"Funny a lone, lost steer could uncover so much evidence," Bilious laughed. "It was somethin' of itself with that worked-over brand, but when it led tuh Jeff Singleton ketchin' Childs plantin' Gus Pickering's ransom letter on his saddle it shore led tuh the unravelin' o' the plot. All we want now is tuh git Ray Childs away from yuh, an' I'm just waitin' here fer Jeff an' his posse. I've already learned that Gus got a grub supply from Whitehead this afternoon."

"Yuh don't expect tuh live tuh tell it tuh anybody, do yuh?" Steed retorted.

"There's a man here who will tell 'em," Bilious bluffed.

Suspicion of treachery within their own camp caused the three men to exchange glances. Bilious had noticed that the saloon was now empty save for himself, the two gunmen flanking him on both

sides, and the equally dangerous bartender, Sandy Grott.

He took instant advantage of that unwary exchange of glances. He had already picked out Gilly Moore as the easiest foe. He was a small man, and although wiry would not be so hard to throw around.

With a swoop of his long arm Bilious caught the smaller man around the back of the neck and half cuffed, half jerked him forward with terrific force. Gilly Moore came forward in a running fall and his head went into Montasano Steed's stomach like a battering ram just as that individual's gun came out of the holster.

With an explosive grunt Steed went to the floor and Moore fell over him. With all the agility he could muster Bilious legged it for the door, and the same twilight that had kept him from recognizing his enemies now protected him, as Sandy Grott missed him with a beer bottle which shattered against the wall.

By now Bilious had his gun in action, and at the door he turned and fired into the row of bottles directly over the bartender's head. He was rewarded by a hearty oath and the sound of tinkling glass and dripping liquor. Then he dashed through the swinging doors and mounted the first saddled horse he saw in the street. There being but two

there, he knew by the length of the stirrups on the animal he had selected that he was on Montasano Steed's mount.

He jerked the bridle off the other horse, rapped it across the rump with the ends of his bridle reins to send it trotting away, and then he urged the horse he was riding toward the farther side of the hill that guarded the town. Several bullets pursued him from the saloon, but it was too dark for any of them to hit the mark, and in a few minutes he was temporarily out of danger.

"Muffed my chance by havin' too damn' much gall," he cursed disgustedly. "If Jeff does ride in here now without a posse——"

Jeff, he knew, was the man the outlaws were out to get. Young Ray Childs was but a pawn in their game. Unless Jeff was eliminated pretty promptly their profitable plundering would be at an end. Bilious was reasonably sure that Jeff would find his way to Desolation when he learned that Montasano Steed's gang had disappeared, and he knew that Jeff would be as good as dead if he arrived alone.

The eccentric puncher now had three weighty problems on his mind besides his own personal predicament. There was Jeff to protect, Ray Childs to find, and finally, and of much more importance to

him personally, was keeping Marie from being molested by Montasano Steed.

"I'd ort tuh have shot him while he was down there on the floor," he regretted. "Still, I promised her."

There was no chance to recover his own horses and camp outfit. Even though not all the population of Desolation was in sympathy with the outlaw gang the most of them would take Ab Whitehead's orders, and Ab himself could no more keep from entangling himself with any crooks that happened along than he could keep from breathing.

He was not followed; it would have been futile anyway, and his enemies knew it, what with a whole wide desert and a dark night like the present to hide in.

It was the actions of his horse which finally gave him an idea. The animal was anxious to be off, and fretted impatiently when he tried to hold it still. Somebody, he was quite sure, would soon ride out to give Gus Pickering warning of his escape. One of them was almost certain to be Gilly Moore as soon as he could recapture his horse. The man might or might not have already been at Pickering's hangout, but he assuredly would know where it was. And Bilious knew also how horses which are acquainted hang together when in a strange country.

Both Steed's and Moore's mounts were Cross Anchor horses.

After a wait of perhaps half an hour he gave the caging horse its head and it took him unpleasantly close to the town again. Then he crossed a trail and his horse put down its head and smelled along the ground. A moment later its voice rang out in an ear-piercing whinny. And from a distance out in the desert came a shrill reply from another horse.

Satisfied, Bilious reined his horse some distance from the trail and waited another quarter of an hour. Nothing happened and he returned to the trail. His horse turned along it without urging, and indeed from time to time Bilious was obliged to check its pace. Occasionally the horse would smell along the ground eagerly, and Bilious knew that it was truly following Gilly Moore's mount.

The trail, he realized, was leading into the rough country adjacent to the Dirty Devil, and every mile was taking him closer to Marie, though it was not along the direct trail to Cabin Creek Basin.

He knew that he must be cautious. Probably both Steed and Moore were ahead of him, and doubtless also the third member of the trio, Ed Haines, would be there awaiting them, as well as Gus Pickering. It would not be a nice bunch to

butt into, and he could not expect the breaks to be with him again.

Suddenly his horse whinnied again, and it was answered by another horse so close at hand that Bilious was more than a little startled. Immediately afterward he heard the creak of saddle leather. He drew his gun and waited breathlessly, and then out of the murk a horse materialized. It was saddled, but had no bridle.

In a flash it dawned upon Bilious that he had been following a riderless horse most of the night; also that both horses had been over the trail before, and Gus Pickering's camp must be close at hand.

The hour for showdown had come.

CHAPTER XXI

TUB PICKERING HAS A PLAN

MATTIE thought she had never known the meaning of suspense before, when she learned that her brother was in the hands of strong, unscrupulous men. Her father told her bluntly that Ray was being held by Gus Pickering.

"Gus? I can't believe Gus would hurt Ray," she objected.

"Ray was foolish enough to tell Gus that you had lost yore head to this damned Singleton. Gus wants you mighty bad," her father said.

"But he wouldn't hurt Ray even if I refuse to marry him."

"If that was all he might not," Childs said miserably. "But there's a lot more to it than that. There's other men in with Gus, an' they insist that this Singleton an' that detective feller, Bilious, be got rid of."

"But what has that got to do with Ray?"

"Everything. I can't explain, but you've got to make terms with Gus, an' we've got to git rid of Singleton before we can git Ray back."

"Father, what have you been doing?" the girl demanded pointblank. "Are you in with those other men?"

"No; but they've got me cornered, I guess," the man confessed. "I've been a fool, Mattie, but the only way to save us all from disgrace, an' to save Ray, is for you to do as I say. Will yuh, honey?"

"Yes," Mattie replied after a long moment of silence; her face as white as the handkerchief she pressed against her mouth.

"No questions now, but do as I tell yuh," Childs ordered.

That conversation had taken place just before Jeff Singleton prevented them taking the car to go to the Pickering ranch.

They had gone on horseback, meeting Jeff on the way, and his disheveled appearance following his fight with Gus Pickering had awakened all her tenderness toward him, and killed the bitterness which her father's words had engendered when he told her that Jeff could have saved Ray if he would.

Somehow the girl had been relieved when they found that Gus Pickering was missing when they got to the Pick and Ring ranch, but her father certainly was not. And their attitudes again contrasted when they learned that Tub Pickering had been shot by Jeff only a short time before. Mattie was all

sorrow and remorse and anxiety, while her father appeared sardonically pleased.

They were taken into the room where Tub Pickering lay propped up in bed. His wound was a bad one, the bullet having broken the collar bone, but not necessarily fatal. The huge rancher occasionally grimaced with pain, but it was a fighting face which he turned toward his neighbor.

"What'd you come for?" he demanded.

"To make terms," Childs said. "I want my boy back."

"You're an awful fool, Childs, an awful fool," Pickering said. "Is yore girl ready tuh marry Gus?"

"If necessary," Mattie said quietly.

"But yuh don't want t' marry him?" Tub demanded.

"Indeed I don't," the girl said.

"Yo're all right, Mattie," Tub said surprisingly. "Yuh won't have t' marry him if I can help it. Now git outa here while I talk to yore dad."

Wondering helplessly what new development impended Mattie went outside and waited for half an hour or more for her father to appear.

Inside Tub Pickering's bedroom Ezra Childs looked at the wounded rancher helplessly, half challengingly.

"Set down, Ez," Tub invited.

"I don't know that I will," Childs refused. "I want yuh to explain that last remark yuh made to my girl."

"You want her to marry my boy?" Tub asked.

"God, no. I'd almost rather have her dead. But—but that snake of a son of yours has got my boy in his power. To save him she'll have to do it. She can git a divorce, but my boy can't remove——" The man's face began to work convulsively, and he had to pause.

"An' who is responsible for him bein' in such danger?" Tub asked.

"You are, damn yuh!" Childs almost screamed.

"You're half right at that," Tub said sadly. "It's time fer you an' me t' quit hatin' each other an' git down t' facts," he went on. "I admit I give yuh plenty cause t' hate me, but it was the game I was playin'. I wanted more range an' more cattle—never could seem t' balance 'em right—an' you an' Hank Clarke stood in my way."

"Yuh never fought fair," Childs charged.

"I admit it. But when my boy growed up into a fine lookin' young man I seen my mistake. I wanted t' make him clean, an' not a hog like I'd been."

"Yuh failed," Childs sneered.

"Mebbe that was my fault, an' mebbe others had a hand in it," Tub said bitterly. "But until today I thought he was honest."

"Until today?"

"Yes. I knew yuh hated me, Ez, an' I thought yuh was stealin' cattle just t' give me a hard name by blamin' it on me. I was blind t' everything else but tryin' t' stop people from accusin' me an' my boy o' bein' crooks. I figgered you was responsible fer all them managers the Hood people sent out bein' run off, but I never dreamed my boy was in with yuh."

"An' yuh just found it out?" Childs inquired.

"Singleton come over here an' accused us of kidnappin' your boy. It made me mad enough to want t' kill him, but he shot me. After he was knocked out Gus was goin' to kill him, but I couldn't stand fer coldblooded murder. An' then Gus told me that Singleton had t' be killed—that he'd got the evidence that would send him to the pen. I made Gus come through with the whole story. Gawd! T' think that a boy o' mine would stoop t' kidnappin'!"

"What are yuh goin' to do about it?" Childs asked.

"Ez, I can see but one way out of it," Tub rumbled. "Gus was scared when he left here. I know

he went t' move the boy further away—somewhere around Desolation, I think. He's scared, an' he's crazy about yore gal, but I can handle him. It's the other birds I'm worried about."

"Gus is as bad as them," Childs said. "When I told 'em I'd expose the whole deal it was Gus an' Montasano Steed who swore they'd mutilate Ray unless I got rid of Singleton. Gus wanted Mattie, an' Steed was scared on account o' Singleton findin' that steer they'd overlooked. Steed took a shot at Singleton that day, an' as he's a crack shot that miss made him superstitious. An' he was afraid somebody had seen him shoot."

"An' the hide from that steer was the first you knew about 'em stealin' Cross Anchor cattle?" Tub queried.

"It was."

"Gus said yuh raised hell about it. It's one reason why they don't want t' give up the boy."

"I was an awful fool," Childs gritted.

"We gotta be honest with each other, admit that we've both been fools, an' agree t' work together if we're to straighten out this mess," Tub stated.

"Anything to get my boy back," Childs said.

"An' t' keep my boy outa the pen," Tub said heavily.

"Well, I'm in no position to send him up," Childs

said wearily. "But even if he does marry Mattie, an' she's willin' to go through with it, it won't stop Singleton. Only a bullet will do that."

"Mebbe so—an' mebbe not. He got himself engaged t' yore gal, didn't he?"

"An' caused this smash-up," Childs said bitterly.

"It wasn't his fault. I've changed my mind about the boy. He's got guts, an' he can run that ranch. I'd like t' see him left t' run the Cross Anchor in peace. Me an' him could git along. Fired you, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've seen enough of Singleton t' know that the man who goes a-gunnin' for him has got his work cut out. Furthermore, if he's killed some-thin' will sure come out. It's gone too far fer that. Singleton must be persuaded to quit."

"Try it," Childs said grimly.

"We couldn't do it. But a woman like——"

"Just what are yuh drivin' at?" Childs demanded.

"Every man has his price," Tub stated his belief. "Singleton can't be bought with money, an' can't be scared. But if yore gal would promise t' marry him on condition that he give up his evidence, if he's got any, I believe he'd do it."

"But what about Gus?" Childs demanded quickly.

"I'm goin' to tell Pliny to go look for Gus, an' tell him to come back here—that things will be fixed up. When he finds that the gal's married I can make him tell where the boy is an' we'll git him back."

"But there's still the others. They've had a picnic here, an' they want it to last," Childs objected.

"Well, you've been fired, an' they can't make anything now by holdin' yore boy. You've got t' git off the Cross Anchor an' stay off. Go back there an' move yore family over here tonight. It'll help make Singleton jealous, an' the Haines crowd will realize that they can't expect yore help any more," Tub said.

"Well, shall I tell Mattie what we want her to do?"

"No. Gals is funny. Another day t' brood on their separation will make both her an' Singleton more pliable, an' it'll give me time t' git Gus outa the road. You go home an' move your wife over here, an' in the mornin' I'll tell Mattie myself," Tub directed.

Mattie could tell nothing from her father's face when he came out. "Is—is there any hope?" she asked.

"I believe we'll git Ray back all right," he answered. "But it depends on Tub Pickering—an'

you. Will you do anything he asks you to?"

"If—it will save my brother," she said bravely.

"It may not be as bad as yuh think," he told her, "but we've got to go home an' git yore ma. We're goin' to live here."

Knowing the long enmity between her father and Tub Pickering this was the last thing she expected. But all initiative had been taken from her hands. She could only obey. The one shred of hope left to her was old Tub's vague promise that she would not have to marry Gus.

The note which Jeff had left in the seat of the car, and which they discovered on the way home, threw her into still more suspense and anxiety. Unless Ray could be recovered before Jeff found him the young manager would almost certainly be killed. And she knew that a part of herself would die with him.

She drove the car home, and returned to the Pick and Ring ranch with her parents that night, barely missing Jeff on the way.

The next morning Tub Pickering sent for her. The man was better. Against such an iron constitution as his, a broken collar bone seemed to make little impression. This man, whom she had been taught to fear and distrust through her father's hatred of him, regarded her kindly.

"Mattie," he said, "I've learned a lot o' things since yesterday mornin' that I never suspected. I wouldn't have thought my boy would stoop to kidnappin', but I reckon he has. But I've sent fer him t' come back, an' when he does I reckon I can make him give yore brother up."

"Oh, I hope so," she cried eagerly.

"But there's other men with a hand in it that'll be harder t' handle. They want just one thing, or mebbe two, an' it'll be up t' you t' give them what they want."

The girl's hopes began to fade again.

"They want Singleton to leave here, an' if he's got any evidence against them they want it surrendered. If not they'll likely go through with what they threatened against your brother, an' kill Singleton besides if they git a chance. It's plumb evident to 'em now that Singleton won't scare like them other managers did. You've got to persuade him to leave."

"I? How can I?"

"He's in love with yuh, ain't he? Tell him you'll marry him on condition that he resigns his job here an' gives up any evidence he's got, an' that yuh'll marry Gus if he don't."

Mattie suddenly began to tremble. Love, to her, was everything, even though she had stood ready to

sacrifice it for her brother and the family honor.

"I'd be glad to marry Jeff either with or without his position. That means nothing to me. But how am I going to get him to make such an offer?" she asked.

"He won't make the offer. That must come from you," Tub declared.

The girl colored up. "You mean that I must tell Jeff that I'll marry him only on condition that he gives everything else up?"

"I reckon it's the only way without yuh'd rather marry my boy," Tub said grimly.

"O-oh." She was twisting her fingers until they hurt.

"There's more than yore brother t' consider, too," Tub continued. "There's yore dad. I wouldn't want t' tell everything t' his daughter, but there's things he'd like covered up, an' it kin only be done by gittin' Singleton outa the country."

"Has my father been stealing your cattle?" Mattie asked point blank.

"No, I was mistaken about that," Tub grinned.

"Then has he been stealing Cross Anchor cattle?" she persisted.

Pickering shook his head slowly. "No, I reckon he ain't. But sometimes a man's gits hisself imposed upon an' he——"

"Jeff has gone to look for Ray. He left a note," Mattie interrupted. She did not doubt now that her father was in some way tricked into the power of the outlaws and the Pickerings. She felt that it would kill her pride to make such a proposal to Jeff as they asked, yet there was no alternative.

"Yes, my man Pliny told me he thought Singleton had gone to Desolation. We've got to act quick. If he gits down there they'll murder him. Chances are he took the Dirty Devil road, an' if yuh start right away in my car yuh'll probably overhaul him," Tub said cunningly, and watched the girl's face pale at the suggestion that her lover would be killed.

"I'll do it," she declared abruptly. For Jeff's own sake, if nothing else, he must be persuaded to leave the country.

CHAPTER XXII

A RACE WITH DEATH

EZRA CHILDS and a ranch hand had been tinkering with Pickering's car, and it was supposed to be ready to go when Mattie came out. She learned that her father already knew of the plan, and that he intended to accompany her. She gave him a curious look, almost as though he were a stranger. Somehow she felt that his weakness was responsible for all the trouble.

And then her attention centered upon the car—which refused to start. An hour or more slipped away, during which she felt that Jeff was riding toward his death. She became well nigh frantic to be on the way.

But at last it got under way, though limping badly, and Childs finally declared they would have to give it up and use horses.

"No, we can coax it back to the ranch and take our—the company car," Mattie said, and turned in that direction despite her father's protests.

But it was long after noon before they finally got under way in the familiar Cross Anchor car.

They no longer had a right to use it, but Mattie cared little for that.

Even with a car in which they had confidence they made poor time. The road was rough all the way to the head of Wagon Track Gorge, and the girl at the wheel realized that this car was not running as well as it should.

"I don't like the looks o' them clouds over there," Childs said. "If a cloudburst overtook us in the gorge——"

"It'll have to get a quick start then because we can outrun it if we get a few miles lead," Mattie laughed.

Somehow she was feeling almost jubilant. Everything was soon going to be all right. Ray would be rescued; she would not have to sacrifice herself to Gus Pickering; her father would be free from the ranch and the things that menaced him, and, finally, she and Jeff could go somewhere else to begin their career together.

They started down the gorge, and for the first two or three steep miles the girl let the car coast. Then there was a stretch where the road was almost level and she had to give the car just a little gas. She noted a bit peevishly that the engine was inclined to splutter and choke, but she nursed it along without comment until there was another

down-grade. At the bottom of that, in one of the very narrowest parts of the gorge was a short uphill climb caused by the debris of previous floods having collected in a bend in the canyon.

Half-way up the engine died. They had filled the gas tank before leaving the Cross Anchor, but Mattie knew it was not getting gas. She put on the brakes, but presently released them and let the car roll back to the foot of the hill when it became evident that an investigation had to be made.

"Hell of a place for a breakdown!" Childs raged. "If we can't start this thing, an' a flood does come——"

Involuntarily both of them looked up at the towering walls of painted rock above them. To scale those smooth, slippery walls was out of the question.

"The gas line is choked somewhere," Mattie said nervously, as she got out and threw back the hood cover.

"There was dirty gas in the bottom of that barrel I emptied this mornin'," her father confessed, and Mattie looked at him queerly.

They fell to work almost frantically with the wrenches and pliers, testing the line at the vacuum tank and then working toward the carburetor—a thing of mystery to them both. But it was not

long until it was demonstrated to them that just here was the trouble.

"I don't know a thing about the damned thing—but it's gotta be took apart," Childs said, and turned his face back the way they had come in a listening manner. Upon the head of the gorge rested tremendous sullen black clouds, and the crash of distant thunder warned them that one of those sudden, terrific summer storms had broken. Almost at the same time rain began to fall upon them; at first lightly, and then with a disagreeable downpour that badly hampered their unskillful efforts to take the carburetor apart and clean it.

It was very dirty. Every part seemed coated with a sticky, red rust which they eliminated as best they could. Both were drenched and numbed by the cold rain before they got the thing back together again. Then, just before Childs himself took the driver's seat they heard a rumble above them that they knew was not caused by the thunder.

"It's comin'!" Childs breathed in awe. "Please God this thing will work now!"

But it did not. It started, sputtered, and died. Repeated efforts achieved the same results. Something about the carburetor had not been adjusted right.

"We're done, Mattie girl!" Childs cried in despair.

"We can't hope to outrun it, an' we can't climb out. There's somethin' I want to tell yuh though, before I die. Yuh been suspectin' that I was a crook, an' mebbe I have been; but I've had some excuse——"

"Never mind that," the girl cried desperately, and flew again to the engine.

She had no more than raised the hood than a racing horseman came plunging down the canyon. Already the water splashed from under the horse's feet, and he was getting all the speed he could from his animal. He was almost upon the car before he saw it; then he brought his horse up with a jerk.

"There's a cloudburst above, folks, and it will fill this gorge," he yelled. "Hurry!"

The girl looked up from the engine, and Jeff Singleton almost fell off his horse in his amazement. "Mattie! My God, what's the matter with your car?" he demanded as he flung himself from his horse.

"It won't start," she said dully.

"Then take my horse and run for it," he ordered.

"No. I came down here to look for you, Jeff, and I won't leave you," she said, and went into his arms.

"Here, you young fools, git on that horse, both o' yuh an' run fer yore lives," Ezra Childs ordered.

"But you?" Mattie cried despairingly.

"What kind of a grade is it over this little hill?" Jeff demanded.

"All down-grade to the end o' the gorge," Childs replied.

"Get into the car," Jeff ordered, and reached for his lass-rope. In a moment he had doubled his rope and attached one end to the car, sprang into the saddle and taken his dallies.

With Red Top pulling every ounce that was in him, the girl at the wheel, and Ezra Childs pushing behind, the car slowly began to move. It was dragged at a snail's pace up the short incline, while the valiant horse dug in his slipping hoofs frantically. A fall of the horse, a snapped strand of the rope, and their last hope would be gone.

And then the heart-rending effort was over, and the car was gliding down the other side under its own momentum.

Childs leaped to the running board, and Jeff undid his dallies and tossed the rope back over the hood to Childs and got out of the way.

At first Red Top could keep up by trotting, and then as the car gathered momentum the horse had to run his best, and presently it was leaving him. Then it began to slow up as Mattie applied the brakes, but he waved to them, urging them to go on. They might have use for the horse yet, he

knew, and he had not given up hope of Red Top being able to stay ahead of the flood.

Jeff had not known what he was risking or he would never have ventured in to Wagon Track Gorge with those threatening clouds forming above. He had ridden Red Top from the ranch that day, but the horse was a long striker, and he hoped to reach a ranch somewhere to spend the night.

By the time he realized just what kind of a trap he was in he knew that it was too late to turn back. His one chance was to ride on until he found some high place to turn out on and let the flood water rush by. He had seen a car enter the gorge ahead of him, but he had never suspected who was in it until he had come upon it in its stalled condition.

Now, as he raced behind, he found time to wonder what Mattie and her father were doing there, even though he was intently listening to the mighty roar of the water that was getting nearer every instant.

Then in a rather long, straight place in the gorge, he caught sight of the front wall of the flood—a dirty brown mass forty feet high that seemed to suck greedily the narrow road into its gloomy maw as it advanced, careening from side to side of the canyon.

The car had passed from sight, but he knew only

too well how small an obstacle would be sufficient to stop it. Mattie had been steering carefully, he could tell that, avoiding every stone or stick that might impede the progress of the coasting car.

"Come on Red Top!" he pleaded. "If you ever want to flop your lip over an oat again, sling those legs!"

The horse was doing his best, but the tossing, raging torrent was sweeping down upon them as though they were standing still.

And then the gorge suddenly widened out to nearly an eighth of a mile in width. Near the center stood a small round knoll of considerable height up which Jeff saw Mattie and her father madly scrambling. The road here was almost on a level again, and they had no choice but to abandon the car.

Jeff urged his lathering, almost exhausted mount straight up the side of the knoll and reached the crest almost as soon as the others, and the yellow head of the flood was pounding against the bottom of the knoll before they reached the top.

He turned just in time to see the Gargantuan, roily menace lick up the car. It struck, the car was rolled over twice and then disappeared like a chicken swallowed by a huge snake. All three of them shuddered.

Jeff and the girl stood side by side, their arms about each other's waists as the dirty line of the water crept higher and higher up the side of the knoll. The horse, too tired to be interested, stood a few feet away with drooping head. Childs, with folded arms, watched the seething flood and seemed utterly fascinated by it. He was completely oblivious to the young people.

An hour later there was only a small, reddish stream of water trickling down the gorge. Everything was swept clean as a new floor except where here and there something had caught and made a miniature dam of débris, so suddenly had the flood receded. It was dusk before they were able to leave the knoll, and they had no place to go. Jeff, being a stranger to the country, put the next move up to Ezra Childs.

"We'll hit the Dirty Devil a few miles below here, but I don't know of a ranch closer than Cabin Creek Basin, an' that's a good twenty miles. But it's our best bet," Childs said.

Jeff persuaded Mattie to get on the horse and they started, the two men walking silently ahead. Some three or four miles farther on they found a patch of dry wood which the flood had not touched. Here they decided to stop and spend the night.

The men built a fire, and broke off and dragged

in enough wood to last throughout the night. Then they settled down in clammy discomfort to dry their clothes.

"What," Jeff asked at last, "are you folks doing here?"

Mattie's hand timidly sought his. "We came to find you," she said. "We thought you had gone to Desolation."

"Any news of Ray?" he asked.

"In a way, yes. There's a way open to get him back unharmed. Tub Pickering is going to do it. He's sent for Gus."

"And you—are you going to——"

"Jeff, do you love me?" the girl asked softly.

"Of course. You know I do."

"Would you make a great sacrifice for me?"

"Yes," he answered, wondering what was coming next.

"These men will give Ray up only on condition that you leave this country."

"Any other conditions?" he asked coldly.

"None—except the surrender of any evidence you may have. And—and—Jeff—I'll go with you," she offered softly.

Abruptly Jeff got up and walked away. He was gone for half an hour. Never had he thought that a bribe could be any inducement to him, but this

he knew surely to be a bribe—and one which it tried his soul to refuse. To lie down on the job and let the crooks have their way—that was what it amounted to.

He did not blame Mattie. The girl was frantic in her anxiety over her brother, and she did love him. Perhaps also her family honor was at stake. He could not understand why they were willing to let her escape from Gus Pickering while they had means to avoid it.

The temptation was great. Of late nothing mattered so much to him as Mattie Childs. Almost anything was justifiable to get Ray Childs free from the monsters who detained him—but, was the son of old Jack Singleton going to be a quitter? Was he justified in stepping aside from the first big opportunity of his career, from his duty and responsibility?

In his heart he knew that the right thing to do was to see the thing through to a finish, no matter what the cost. Even though Ray Childs did suffer, the fight against the outlaws, the man branders, should not be abandoned. Other men had suffered at their hands and others would continue to suffer until they were put out of business. It was a matter which could not be compromised with honor. Yet if he refused he knew that he would lose Mattie.

He returned to the fire where Mattie and her father were talking together in low tones.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't see my way clear to compromise with these crooks. I guess I'll have to see it through."

Mattie was stunned. In her relief at finding some way out of their difficulties the possibility of his refusal had not occurred to her.

The three of them stared thoughtfully into the firelight.

CHAPTER XXIII

KINDLY PEOPLE

AT day light the next morning Ezra Childs, at Jeff's insistence, mounted Red Top and set out down the Dirty Devil to obtain help, he being the only one who knew the country.

After the ex-foreman had gone Jeff undertook to make Mattie see his viewpoint, but his arguments seemed to make no impression. The girl only shook her head dully.

"I can't seem to think of anything now but my brother in the hands of those fiends," she said. "You don't want to do the one thing that will save him, so I guess that settles it."

Both of them were physically miserable, and certainly there was none of the glamor of romance in their predicament. Despite the fire their clothes felt damp and shrunken; they were hungry, and the fire failed to keep off the chill entirely, so that the morning hours found them numb and uncomfortable.

"But they won't dare to carry out their threats against him," Jeff argued. He told her about find-

ing the cabin where the boy had been hidden, and the words Ray had written with the charred stick.

"You don't know what they might do," she reiterated.

"And Bilious has already gone down to Desolation. I shouldn't be surprised if he's found the boy before this."

She shrugged skeptically.

Jeff lost his temper momentarily. "Somebody is trying to make me the goat to cover up what somebody else has done! If certain people really wanted to get Ray out of this scrape they could do it if they were willing to face the music."

"You mean my father. Well, if that's what you think of us why didn't you let us drown in that cloudburst yesterday instead of trying to play the hero?"

"I wasn't trying to play the hero," Jeff denied hotly.

"Well, I'll never throw myself at your head again," she said with an air of finality.

He became contrite at once. "Mattie, listen to me: I don't want to hurt you, I just want to make you understand. I——"

"I think I'll walk on so father won't have so far to come back with help," Mattie said stiffly.

She walked away and Jeff followed, vainly trying

to make his peace; but she would not talk. He desisted after a while and they walked along in gloomy silence.

The sun came out hot and added to their misery. There was a nasty, fetid odor in the air from the muck left by the cloudburst where it had finally spread out over the wider river bottom. Occasionally they found little drifts of oozy mud which they had to wade through. It was the essence of nauseous discomfort.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when they were met by a team and buckboard coming up the river.

"Glory be, folks, I wuz afraid I'd missed yuh some place!" Harp Draper yelled as he brought his team to a halt. "Lord, you folks musta had some experience!"

"Then you saw my father?" Mattie asked.

"Sure, an' Rube Fellows sent me right out, soon's I could hook up this team."

"We surely appreciate your kindness, and I'm certainly glad to get a ride," Jeff said as he started to help Mattie get in.

"No yuh don't," Harp called, as he sprang down himself. "I got some blankets fer yuh to rest on, while I make yuh some coffee, an' stir up a little grub."

"But we can wait," they both remonstrated.

"No need of it. 'Twon't take me half an hour tuh fix yuh all up, an' yuh'll ride a heap easier," Harp insisted, and carried out his promise.

They were both surprised at the effects of hot coffee on their dispositions. When Harp began to question them about their race with the cloudburst Mattie dilated upon Jeff's heroism, and he protested by praising her coolness and bravery. Yet neither spoke directly to the other.

At the Cabin Creek ranch Mattie was made much of by Grandma Fellows, who ushered her into the house with motherly solicitude. "Lay right down an' rest, honey, an' when yuh git rested yuh can put on some o' Marie's clothes. It's been an awful shock to yuh, I can see that; but yuh musn't worry."

"I'm sorry to be so much bother," Mattie apologized. Her eyes rested upon a dark-skinned girl in the doorway, with a small boy on her hip. The girl's eyes were friendly, but tragic; the child frankly curious.

"Where is my father?" Mattie inquired.

"He borrowed a fresh horse and left here soon after he got here," Grandma Fellows answered. "Said he had urgent business that had tuh be tended to."

Mattie straightened in alarm. She guessed that he had gone on to Desolation—but why?

"He said yuh wasn't tuh worry one bit—that he'd fix everything up," Grandma Fellows assured her.

Reluctantly Mattie gave in and lay down. They darkened the room and urged her to sleep.

"Yuh'll be jumpy at first, but we'll be right here, dearie," Grandma assured her.

The dark-skinned girl took the boy on her lap and began to croon him to sleep. Mattie watched them in a sort of dim fascination, and before she knew it the lullaby had taken effect upon her. She slept.

The lamps were lighted when they awakened her. They insisted that she wear some of Marie's clothes instead of her own untidy ones, and she discovered that she was almost the same size as the dark girl.

Supper was ready, and the ranch hands were standing awkwardly against the wall waiting for her. One blond, muscular giant of thirty-five or forty came forward bashfully.

"My son, Rube, Miss——" Grandma introduced.

"Childs," Mattie hastened to say. "I'm very pleased to meet you, but sorry——"

"That's all right, Miss," Rube Fellows mumbled hastily. "It didn't hurt Harp a bit." He picked up the little boy and retreated hurriedly.

Grandma introduced her to the rest of the men, and they were by no means as bashful as her son.

She looked about the room for Jeff and found him missing. "Isn't Mr. Singleton here?" she queried.

"These men!" Grandma Fellows laughed. "No, he borrowed a horse, too, an' beat it some place. Business that couldn't wait, he said. But he told us to be sure an' tell you everything would be all right."

A knife thrust could not have hurt her worse. He had gone to Desolation—and, perhaps, death. And she was helpless.

They would not let her help do the dishes after supper, so she held Bobby and courteously replied to their questions, or rather to those of Grandma Fellows, since Marie rarely spoke, and Rube sat bashfully in a corner with never a word out of him.

"So you're from the Cross Anchor, eh?" Grandma remarked after she had drawn out that admission.

"I have lived there all my life. My father was foreman—until recently."

"This other young man; does he work there, too?"

"He's the manager," Mattie replied with a slight blush.

"Well, he seemed to have presence o' mind, the way he got yore car started. Yore father said yuh'd sure have drowned if he hadn't come along."

"It looked pretty bad," Mattie admitted.

"By the way, is there a feller workin' up there who calls hisself Bilious?" Grandma asked.

"Bilious? Why, why, really I don't know," Mattie faltered. "He was there, but I haven't seen him lately."

That was perfectly true. Bilious, she felt sure, was doing some sort of detective work for Jeff, but she could not afford to confide the fact to strangers.

"Oh!" the low exclamation was from Marie, and Mattie glanced at her in surprise.

"The long, hungry simpleton—I'd like to shake him!" Grandma exclaimed.

"Aw, he'll turn up again," Rube said jerkily.

"No; he won't come back," Marie declared with despondent conviction.

"Does—does he mean much to you?" Mattie asked the question generally, but her eyes were on the girl.

"He did once, but—" Marie's voice choked up.

"He left here three years ago, very sudden," Grandma Fellows explained, "an' he's only been back once. Him an' Marie——"

"Please, Grandma?" the girl begged.

"All right," Grandma Fellows conceded, and changed the subject.

Presently Bobby slipped off Mattie's lap and

went over to Rube. "Take me out to de bunkhouse, Daddy," he ordered.

Rube, glad of a chance to escape from too many women, hoisted the boy on his shoulder and went out.

"He calls my boy daddy, but Rube, of course, isn't his father. There were reasons why we didn't want him to be askin' about his own father, an' when he begin to call Rube daddy as soon as he begun to talk we just let him do it," Grandma explained.

"I see," Mattie murmured. Tragedy was striking here, too, and this man Bilious appeared to be the heavy villain. She had always thought there was something queer about him. He had been missing about three years. The little boy was nearly that old. Marie was his mother. There was obviously a desertion of some sort, and Bilious must be the deserter.

She would tell Jeff, she vowed, that Bilious was not the kind of man to be trusted.

But her own worries drove other matters from her mind. Jeff had refused to resign. In her heart she admired him for the stand he had taken, though it was a blow to her vanity that he would not resign for her sake. When she thought that the outlaws might carry out their threats against her

young brother because of his refusal, she hated him. But when she thought that they might instead murder Jeff to get rid of him she felt as only a woman can who loves her man.

Worry over her father, however, was almost predominant in her mind. Was he some way implicated in the conspiracy that seemed to exist? Jeff, in his anger, had let her know that he suspected her father of being in collusion with the men who were holding Ray. And why had her father consented to live at Tub Pickering's when he had hated the man for years? Could it all be true, this terrible supposition, and was it possible that Tub Pickering had fooled her; that it was all part of a move to get Jeff in some out-of-the-way place where he could be murdered? Desolation, from all accounts, would be an ideal place for the purpose.

Was there nothing, *nothing* that she could do?

CHAPTER XXIV

DISGRACE

BILIOUS was not a man to blunder blindly into a camp full of possible foes. Discretion was his motto. He knew that one chance bullet could completely wreck the most carefully built plan if it happened to collide with the person of the builder.

Finding that he had followed Gilly Moore's riderless horse home he tactfully withdrew from the vicinity far enough so that his horse's loudest whinny could not be heard from the camp. There he unbridled the horse and staked it with a lariat on its front leg. He knew that he might have urgent need for the horse again, and a few mouthfuls of grass would not hurt it.

It was daybreak before he finally ensconced himself behind a jumble of rocks from which he could get a partial view of the outlaw camp.

Some one had built a fire; he could see the smoke curling above the tops of the thick, scrubby trees in which the outlaws had pitched their camp. Those trees, incidentally, were the only ones in the

vicinity, though the surrounding country was upheaved and broken into all sort of weird shapes by some long past agitation of nature.

Presently a man walked out with a bucket and a rope, which he let far down in a crack in the rocks. Bilious had wondered where they got their water supply, and now he licked his lips thirstily. The man he recognized easily as Ed Haines.

Another thirty minutes passed, and then Bilious had a queer feeling of relief as he saw Ray Childs come out with the bucket and rope for more water. Bilious could have made the boy hear him by yelling, and he was close enough to see that the boy did not look especially ill treated.

A few minutes later Gus Pickering rode out on a light horse, apparently in search of the other animals. Bilious was tempted to go down and try to rescue the boy. He was convinced that he would have only Haines to deal with at first, and if he got the drop on him he could handle young Pickering when he came back. If he delayed they might move the boy somewhere else. If not he knew that he might have trouble getting a drink before the hot day was over.

He began to maneuver closer to the camp, but moving cautiously. He was under no illusions as to the fighting ability of Ed Haines. The only way

to play safe with him was to make sure that he had the drop. Unfortunately he was too long getting in, and had to sprawl in a most undignified flatness behind a small hummock to avoid being seen by Gus Pickering as that worthy drove in half a dozen horses, among them Gilly Moore's mount.

There was too much excitement in the camp for Bilious to dare move, and he was in a most unpleasant position. Finally, to his relief, he saw Gus Pickering ride away leading Moore's horse behind him. Gus, obviously was taking the horse back to Desolation.

After waiting until he was sure Gus could not be called back Bilious began again to worm his way toward the trees.

It was dangerous business, for part of the route had to be negotiated in the open. At last the trees were only three or four rods away. He had just clambered over a bank of dirt seven or eight feet high, when a voice spoke directly behind him.

"Git 'em up, buddy, an' don't turn around."

Bilious' hands went into the air, and he faced the front as ordered. A moment later Ed Haines came from behind and took his gun.

"All right now, into the trees," Haines ordered.

To Bilious' amazement the saddles were on the horses as though Haines and the boy intended to

ride. Ray Childs, rather white of face, was standing quietly by one of the horses.

"What's the idea?" Haines demanded of Bilious.

"I was after the boy," Bilious said. "The best advice I can give yuh is tuh let us both go."

"Both go? What d'ye mean? The kid's free to go if he wants to."

"Is that right?" Bilious demanded of the boy.

"Sure. I was just goin' to start home," Ray replied.

"Yuh mean tuh say yuh ain't been kidnapped?"

"I ain't."

Ed Haines was smiling grimly, and Bilious was completely nonplussed.

"Well, there's been a lot o' people fooled beside me," Bilious said. "Yore folks think yuh have, an' I remember seein' some writin' in a cabin that yuh made with a burned stick."

"It was just a joke," Ray said nervously.

"An' yo're shore yo're goin' home now?"

The boy nodded.

"Well, I'll be damned," Bilious said weakly.

"Sorry yuh couldn't be a hero," Haines grinned.

"Where's yore horse?"

"My own horse is in Desolation, but I got a borrowed horse staked back here a ways."

"Fine. We'll go git it purty soon," Haines

laughed. He turned to the boy. "Yuh'd just as well ride, Ray. Yo're folks'll be worried enough about yuh. This bird will be a lot more useful to us than you was, mebbe."

Without a word the boy mounted a horse, and led away another carrying a bed, and possibly some grub.

"You an' Singleton are friends, I reckon?" Haines questioned when the boy had disappeared from sight.

"Almost strangers," Bilious denied.

"I'm goin' to test that out," Haines said. "If Singleton is a friend of yours he'll come a runnin', I reckon. If he ain't it'll be a damn sight worse fer you."

Presently they set out to get the horse Bilious had hidden. Bilious might have stalled a little, but he knew the horse wanted a drink, and he was never cruel. Haines tossed the captured gun carelessly aside and they started.

They were not gone long, and the first thing Bilious noted when he returned was that his gun was missing. Haines was too busy to note it.

"Reckon I'll have to keep you tied up most o' the time," he said. "I don't crave to hurt yuh, but it'd be too damn' tiresome settin' over yuh with a gun."

He knew exactly how to go about the business

without risk to himself, but he suddenly halted as a boy's thin, nervous treble commanded him to raise his hands. There was a rope in his hands at the moment, but he half turned, and his hand dropped toward the gun in his holster.

The next moment he staggered back, clasped his hand to his side, and then collapsed to the ground.

In a moment Bilious leaped over and took his smoking gun from Ray Childs' nerveless grasp.

"Gee, I hated tuh shoot him," the boy murmured, "but I couldn't leave you in their hands."

"Yuh damned ungrateful pup!" Haines snarled.

"I'm sorry, Ed," the boy murmured.

"Yuh'll be a damn' sight sorrier purty soon," the wounded man raged.

Bilious took the outlaw's gun and looked at the wound. "This is a case for a doctor," he said soberly. "I can't go to Desolation, an' I won't send the boy."

Haines' face turned gray. "Have I got to die here?" he complained. "Ray, yuh know what I done for you. They'd have sure mutilated yuh fer life if it hadn't been fer me."

"See here, kick in with the truth of this whole thing, an' I'll see what I can do," Bilious said.

"No," Ray cried. "I'll go for the doctor."

"Nix," Bilious said crisply. "I've gathered that

these other three birds wanted to harm you, an' Haines here kept 'em from it. If yuh go to Desolation yuh'll fall into their hands again. Ain't I right?"

Haines nodded weakly. "I wouldn't stand fer the brandin' an' that sort o' thing. It was a rotten thing to do in the first place, but it worked on them other fellers, an' we had to git rid o' this Singleton."

"Don't—don't talk, Ed," the boy begged tearfully.

Bilious contemplated the wounded rustler thoughtfully. He could not be moved with the means at their command, and if he did not soon have medical attention he would die.

"I'll git a doctor fer yuh," he sighed. "Now, listen, Ray. I want you to go home, but yore closest way is by the Dirty Devil. I want you to take a note for me to Rube Fellows up in Cabin Creek basin. I'll tell yuh how to find the place."

Bilious made the wounded man as comfortable as possible, then wrote a brief note on a scrap of dirty paper and gave it to the boy with directions, and started him out with Ed Haines' gun on him. Then he changed Montasano Steed's saddle to another horse and set out for Desolation.

Ray Childs was not altogether a stranger to the Desolation Desert. Part of two winters he had

ridden with the cowpunchers there for a short time. This he knew to be the Pick and Ring winter range, but he had no trouble finding the road that led to the Dirty Devil.

The boy's mind was in a turmoil, but he felt that much depended upon getting Bilious' note through to Rube Fellows. He had to read it, and knew that there was no time to waste. Yet it was a long, wearisome road, and it was near sundown when he approached what he believed to be the ranch he sought.

"Is Rube Fellows here?" he demanded of the first man he saw.

"Yeah; he's in the house, I reckon," he was answered.

Ray dismounted from his jaded, tender-footed horse and hurried toward the house indicated. As he passed by a window Mattie happened to look up. Before he could knock on the door it opened, and he found himself clasped in his sister's arms while she sobbed convulsively.

The Fellows family gathered about wonderingly.

"Ray, Ray, what have they done to you? Are you all right?" the girl demanded when she became coherent enough to talk.

"Sure, I'm all right," the boy replied disdainfully. "Say, where's Jeff?"

"He's gone to Desolation to look for you, I think."

"What? Gawd, sis, he'll be killed sure!" the boy exclaimed. "Say, where's that man, Rube Fellows?"

"Right here," Rube answered quickly.

"Read this note," Ray urged.

Because everyone seemed vitally interested, Rube read it aloud.

Dear Rube:—

I'm in a heap of trouble. If you can, come over to Desolation with men enough to take it apart and see what makes it run. The boy will tell you who to look out for.

Bilious.

"He's in trouble. Oh, Rube, you'll start at once, won't you? And I'm going with you," Marie cried.

"And I must go too," Mattie cried.

"Me an' the boys'll be there by mornin', but you girls will have to stay here," Rube said firmly, and despite his fear of women they knew that he meant it. Within an hour the seven men of the horse ranch rode away, grimly determined to see what was wrong at Desolation.

Then Mattie found herself alone with her brother. "You didn't tell them everything, Ray," she charged. "You only told them that Montasano

Steed, Gilly Moore, and Gus Pickering were the men to watch out for."

"I told 'em enough. Those fellers want to git Jeff an' Bilious."

"Father is there, too. Did you know that?"

"He is? Why, why, didn't yuh keep him away? Now he's liable to——"

"Ray, tell me everything. I probably suspect as much as you know anyway. I must have the truth. Did—did father have a hand in your—your kidnapping?"

"No. Gus Pickering made me go along with him after I'd told him Jeff had cut him out. He locked me in an old cabin an' took the word to Haines, Steed an' Moore. They decided to tell dad, I guess. They wanted to git rid of Jeff, an' they put it up to dad to git rid of him or else they'd do a lot o' things to me."

"I see," Mattie breathed in relief.

"Yuh don't neither," Ray retorted. "I guess I might as well tell yuh, but dad has been in with them fellers in their cattle stealin' right along."

Mattie hid her face in shame, and for a long time there was a miserable silence.

"Somethin' happened, an' they moved me down on the desert," the boy went on presently. "Montasano Steed an' Gilly Moore were in favor of—of

torturin' me an' sendin' me home as a sign to Singleton of what he could expect if he didn't quit. Because dad was a rustler, toe, an' fer the shame of it an' everything they figgered we'd all have tuh keep quiet. Gus Pickering was in favor of the same thing, but he insisted on findin' out first whether you'd marry him or not, an' they all hoped they could get a shot at Jeff first so the rest wouldn't be necessary."

"Go on," Mattie choked. "I want to hear it all."

"Ed Haines wouldn't stand fer the brandin' an' told 'em so. He told 'em it would end everything. He wanted Gus to go home an' play innocent. When he finally got 'em all away he told me I could go if I'd promise to claim it was all a joke. If it did come out everybody would know that dad was a crook, so I promised. Then Bilious come along tryin' to git me away from 'em, an' I had tuh shoot Ed Haines tuh protect Bilious. Then Bilious went tuh Desolation for a doctor for Ed, an' I had to come here. That's all."

"Father a crook—a man brander! Probably he'll be a murderer before it's over. Oh, Ray, the disgrace of it!"

"Because no manager could stay long enough tuh git wise tuh things, an' dad had the run o' things it was easy," the boy talked on. "Haines, Steed, an'

Moore would take Cross Anchor cattle into the Tumblin' Hills, brand 'em with a worked over Pick and Ring, an' then Gus Pickering would sell 'em. They'd work a considerable sized bunch at a time, an' never let 'em run on Pick an' Ring range fer fear Tub would git wise."

"Tub? Wasn't he in it?" Mattie asked.

"Not a bit. They kept him stirred up just enough so that everybody would suspect him, but he wasn't in. The people they sold to knew Gus, an' that was enough for them."

"Who told you all this?"

"Ed Haines. He told me the whole business tuh show me how deep dad was in so's I wouldn't squeal."

"Well, we musn't squeal, but we must tell father we know what he is, and make him leave this country," Mattie said dolefully. "There's just one thing I'm glad of, and that is that Jeff didn't accept my offer to marry him if he'd give up here. He won't have to marry the daughter of a thief."

"I don't savvy that," Ray said, "but I know he'll have an awful time gittin' outa Desolation if he's there. That gang there stands in with Haines an' his crowd, or with Montasano Steed rather, because they know Steed better for some reason."

"Better come in, children," they heard Grandma

Fellows call, and they went in obediently. Both felt beaten.

"Yuh mustn't worry," Grandma Fellows counseled them. "Rube an' the boys'll fix things up all right. That's what I've told Marie, too—that she'll have Bilious himself back here safe enough. Just wait."

There was nothing else to do, but it was an agonizing process for all of them. They knew that even Rube Fellows might never return.

CHAPTER XXV

HOT LEAD

JEFF was aware that he was doing an incautious thing at least in riding into a small desert town which he strongly suspected harbored enemies. But the issue had to be faced some time, and that soon, unless he was to own himself beaten.

He had ridden part of the night, but had been obliged to lay over owing to his unfamiliarity with the trail. Broad day though it was when he approached the town he was decidedly uneasy. Ezra Childs was there ahead of him, he was sure of that; but he had no idea what effect that might have. He would much rather have as much assurance that Bilious was in the vicinity.

He proceeded to do the wrong thing immediately upon his arrival; which was to enter Ab Whitehead's store and inquire for Ezra Childs.

The merchant looked him over shrewdly before replying. "I think your man is over in the saloon. Is your name Singleton? He said to let him know if you arrived. I'll send over for him."

The man sent a messenger over to the saloon without giving Jeff time to answer his question. That he knew Jeff by description, however, argued that he was speaking the truth, and Jeff waited.

The messenger returned presently. "He said for yuh to come over to the saloon," he reported to Jeff.

Jeff walked slowly across the street. His gun was loose and readily accessible. Even though Childs was in the saloon it was no sign that he would not meet the outlaws he sought there. Childs himself, for all he knew, might be willing to kill him. The ex-foreman had shown his hostility often enough.

He pushed the swinging doors open and stepped just inside. Coming in out of the bright sunshine he found the place disconcertingly dark. He could see three men at a card table in the rear, but at first he could not make them out.

"Hey, Singl'ton, what the hell yuh mean—fol-lerin' me, huh?" he heard a drunken voice demand, and Ezra Childs got up from the card table and lurched forward. At the same time the other two men got up, one of them going to one wall, and the other opposite.

Childs was staggering toward him with his hand upon his gun, and Jeff waited, not so much for the man as for his sight to become accustomed to the

darkened room. In a moment he could see well enough, and he recognized the two men with Childs as Montasano Steed and Gilly Moore. They were to the right of him, but now he saw another man step up to the bar on his left, and that man was Gus Pickering.

Realization that he had walked into a death trap swept over him, but it was too late to retreat now. They would get him before he was half way across the street. Childs was coming on, pretending drunkenness and grunting insulting language, but

- Jeff did not believe the man was drunk.

Then Childs was directly before him, his face thrust insultingly into Jeff's.

"I knew yuh'd come, an' I been foolin' 'em. I'm payin' yuh back. When I call yuh a liar you git Steed an' Moore. I'll take the other two," Childs whispered tensely. The others thought he had only paused for breath.

For one moment Jeff almost reeled under the shock of Childs' sudden change of tone. "I get you," he said then.

"Yo're a damn' liar," Childs yelled.

Jeff was oblivious to everything but his chosen man, Montasano Steed. The fellow was a gunman, and he, too, had been waiting for the signal. But he had not expected Jeff to fire at him and he was

a bit leisurely on the draw, perhaps wanting to make sure that he did not hit Childs. Jeff's shot rang out first, and Montasano Steed, after a fruitless effort to pull the trigger collapsed in a huddle.

Gilly Moore had found Childs directly between him and his target, and he was yelling at the man to get out of the road before he discovered Childs' intention. With a hoarse curse he raised his gun and fired, and the two shots came almost together, and both men reeled as they were hit.

Jeff whirled to face Gus Pickering and saw that young giant momentarily stunned by the unexpected developments. But a gun was flashing in the hand of Sandy Grott over the bar. Jeff leaped forward, and the bartender missed. Then Jeff fired and Grott slumped behind his bar. Gilly Moore and Ezra Childs were staggering around the floor firing at each other, and the room was almost instantly full of smoke and the acrid odor of burning powder.

Then Jeff felt himself hurled backward as Gus Pickering leaped upon him; Gus preferring to chance a physical combat to taking a chance with his gun, knowing himself rather slow on the draw.

With a quick spring Jeff got loose and set himself for his foe's next lunge. His gun was in his right hand, and Gus reached blindly for it. Jeff swung

his left, his natural hitting hand, and the blow landed fairly on the chin as Pickering was coming in. Gus was knocked out. His head snapped back a foot, but before he struck the floor a random bullet from Gilly Moore's gun struck him in the back.

Moore himself plunged headlong a moment later. Jeff stumbled over the body of Ezra Childs, and picking it up he carried it outside, into the fresh air.

It seemed that the entire population of Desolation had been drawn outside by the firing, but they were too stunned to take definite action. To Jeff's relief Childs was still living.

"They'd 'a' got yuh sometime, so I framed it up so's I could help yuh," Childs panted. "With them outa the way mebbe yuh can git my boy back. I—I couldn't stand fer murder—an' yuh—was white—up there in the gorge. I—I been a awful fool, but don' hold it ag'in'—my family."

His head jerked back spasmodically. He was dead.

There were men in the crowd who would have gladly taken a shot at Singleton had they dared. But they were conscious that the battle was over, and that he had been victorious. And the sight of four dead men had a sobering effect.

Suddenly the crowd parted as a tall, thin puncher in a green checked shirt pushed his way through belligerently.

"I heard some shots back there an' I want tuh know who's been fightin'," he told the citizenry. Then his gaze rested upon Jeff Singleton and he gave a whoop.

"Mean tuh say yuh've licked the whole damn' population?" he demanded.

"They tried to trap me, but Ez Childs here foiled them. Together we managed to get the ones who aimed to do the killing, but there's others here it seems—" Jeff's eyes rested upon Ab Whitehead, and the merchant began to retreat.

"No yuh don't!" Bilious roared, and reaching out a long arm he jerked the man forward.

"Yuh'll stick closer tuh us than a brother till Rube Fellows an' his boys git here," Bilious declared. "I reckon they won't start nothin' while we got the ole he-one where we kin puncture his carcass," he added to Jeff.

"You mean you've sent for help?"

"A plenty of it. I sent the Childs boy to Cabin Creek Basin, an' Rube'll be here fast as horseflesh can bring him," Bilious asserted.

"You—you got the boy?" Jeff asked eagerly.

"Yep. Haines was hidin' him out there at one o'

the Pick and Ring winter camps, or rather just lettin' him go when I arrived."

"Bilious, I'm proud of you if you saved that boy," Jeff said fervently.

"I regret tuh say that it was the boy who saved me," Bilious admitted, "but Ed Haines is layin' out there with a bullet in him, pinin' fer a doctor."

"We'll send the doctor out, and a rig to bring him in," Jeff said, and gave his orders curtly. For the time being he was bossing the town without opposition, with the help of Bilious and his hostage.

"What about Childs? Was he a crook, or was he not?" Bilious managed to inquire later in the day.

"I don't know what he was—he passed out like a man," Jeff said softly, and Bilious nodded.

Neither of them dared to sleep that night. The town, though afraid of them, was hostile, and perhaps the fact that they kept Ab Whitehead at their mercy saved them from attack by a mob.

During the night Ed Haines was brought in, and they went to see him. The wounded outlaw smiled grimly.

"Well, yuh kinda won out," he remarked.

"We did," Jeff said curtly. "It looks as though you'd branded your last man, Haines."

"Oh, that." Haines managed another grin. "Send these other birds out. I wanta talk to you."

They sent them all out except Whitehead. Bilious would take no chances on losing him.

"I'm figgerin' the game's up, but I'm makin' a play to git off as easy as I can," Haines said candidly.

"Come clean and we'll see what we can do," Jeff encouraged.

"The kid'll bear me out that I stood by him against the others," Haines said, and Bilious nodded agreement.

"I told him his dad was in with us to keep him quiet, an' he was. But I lied to him in one way. Childs always thought he was justified in stealin'. It was Tub Pickering who caused old Henry Clarke to go busted by some crooked work here on this desert, hoggin' the water in a bad year so that most of Clarke's cattle died. It always rankled with Childs an' when we broached him with a proposition to steal Pick and Ring cattle he thought it was a chance to git back at Tub. He made things easy for us, but he'd never take a dollar himself.

"At first there was just us three, he thought, an' Whitehead's gang down here, but Gus Pickering was in with us. Gus pertended to ketch us stealin' his dad's cattle to throw a scare into Childs. He agreed then to help us, but he had Childs by the wool. Made Childs agree to let him marry his girl.

Ez was wantin' to quit by that time, but he couldn't—we wouldn't let him."

The outlaw stopped for a drink. Jeff could feel nothing but pity for the dead foreman, as he realized what the man must have suffered.

"So you were stealing from both outfits," Jeff asked.

"No. That's where we fooled Childs. He thought we was stealin' Pick an' Ring cattle, while all the time we was gittin' Cross Anchor stuff."

"But those cattle at Cardinal Buttes?"

"A blind. Childs got suspicious, an' we hazed that bunch up there to prove to him that we were gittin' Pick an' Ring stuff. Old Tub got wise an' damn near caused a lot of trouble. The old coot had discovered that cabin with the brandin' irons an' the picture about the same time, an' he was on the war path."

"Say," exclaimed Jeff, "who stole those things from me? Has Gus got 'em?"

"Nobody has. They been destroyed. It was Childs that lifted 'em that time you an' old Tub was mixin' it up in your office."

Jeff could no longer be surprised at this revelation. Rather he felt pity for the old man's desperate efforts to hold together a structure that crumpled in his hands.

"And that cabin," Jeff prompted. "How many men did you brand up there?"

A rather horrible smile came over Haines' face. "Nobody," he said.

"That picture!" Jeff said harshly.

"That picture was of my back, an' I had a hell of a time gittin' the paint off after it was took."

"You mean——"

"Shore. Whenever a manager got to makin' trouble we took him up to that cabin, showed him the picture, heated up the irons, an' then let him go on condition he resigned his job an' kept his mouth shut. It worked, too. They was scared themselves, an' they didn't want to expose the men they thought had been branded before."

"Whose idea was that?" Jeff demanded.

"Montasano Steed's. Part of the success of the trick, I guess, was because he always seemed so damned anxious to put it on 'em."

For a moment there was a look on Bilious Burket's face that was not good to see.

"Whitehead, come here," Jeff ordered suddenly, and the merchant took a trembling step forward.

"I don't know exactly how much hand you crooks had in things down here, and I'm not going to have you arrested—on condition that you keep your mouth shut. Haines has redeemed himself in a

way, and he certainly never was as bad as the others, so I'm willing to drop the whole thing here on condition that nothing is ever said about the part Ezra Childs had in this business. Is that agreeable?"

"Sure it is. I don't know anything about it anyway," Whitehead said sullenly.

"You, Haines?"

The wounded outlaw plainly showed his relief. "Count on me," he promised heartily.

"But from here it's open season on rustlers," Jeff said crisply. "I expect to run cattle on this desert next winter, and if there's anything crooked pulled off down here this place will be all that its name implies."

For a moment his eyes clashed with those of Ab Whitehead, and then the merchant flinched away. Jeff knew it would be a long time before Whitehead and his associates defied the Cross Anchor.

The next morning Rube Fellows and his men reached town on tired horses. They were met by Bilious, who had been watching for them intently. He shook hands with Rube Fellows while the other men clamored.

"Where's yore badmen? Where do we start in?"

"The fightin's over. All you boys do is shout," Bilious told them.

"Another one o' yore damn' practical jokes—

makin' us ride hell-fer-leather all night," Harp Draper murmured disgustedly.

"Nope, it was no joke. I got here too late myself," Bilious said. "I'll show yuh."

They followed him into the room where the dead men were, and not until then were they convinced that Bilious was not fooling them. At sight of Montasano Steed, Rube Fellows gave a start.

"You—got him, did yuh, Bilious?" he asked softly.

"No, but he's just as dead as if I had. How—how'll she take it?"

"It's a good thing for both her an' the boy," Rube said.

"Shore. All three of yuh ort tuh be a lot happier with him outa the way," Bilious said.

Rube started to say something, and then stopped, while a curious gleam came into his eye.

Just then Jeff came up and Bilious introduced him to Rube. It did not take those two long to size each other up to their mutual satisfaction.

An hour or so later the bodies of Ezra Childs and Gus Pickering were in a wagon driven by Pliny, who had found a most unexpected end to his search for Gus.

"I think it'll be better to send Childs back that way and give his children a chance to adjust them-

selves before they see him," Jeff agreed to Pliny's offer to take the body back.

"I'll go with him," Bilious volunteered.

"You," Rube Fellows said crisply, "are goin' home with me. You an' me an' Marie have got some-thin' to talk over."

CHAPTER XXVI

SOMETHING IS EXPLAINED

JEFF knew that it was his disagreeable duty to break the news of their father's death to Mattie and Ray; but he dropped behind Fellows and Bilious to postpone it as long as he could, while he strove vainly to think of the proper way to do it.

He saw Mattie and her brother waiting at the gate, and noted the flash of relief that crossed Mattie's face as she saw him. Then he became aware that there was something wrong with Bilious. That puncher was hitching nervously at his trousers, and from all appearances getting ready to run.

"Well, Marie, I got the son of a gun," Rube Fellows said. "He's yours if yuh want him."

"Bilious!" the dark-skinned girl cried, and stood as though waiting with happiness in her eyes.

"Marie, my Gawd, have a heart! Yuh can't expect me—right here before all——"

"It's all right, Bilious. I won't stand in yore way a minute. Take her. I'll bear up some way," Rube said. He stepped back and winked elaborately at

the others, while Marie approached with hesitation, and then suddenly buried her face against Bilious' shoulder.

"What does it mean?" Jeff wondered, and discovered that Mattie was the only person close enough to hear him.

"He's the father of that little boy, and he deserted the girl. I'm not surprised that he don't know how to act," Mattie said.

"Look here," Bilious exclaimed in agitation, "I don't deny I'm plumb in love with Marie, but I ain't no skunk. Yo're married to her, Rube, an' I'll be damned if I come between yuh."

Marie straightened up quickly. "What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Rube and I never were married."

"*What?*" Bilious croaked. "The boy calls him daddy."

"And you thought I meant to get a divorce from Rube when I offered to—to—" Marie gasped, now red and white by turns.

"Yuh won't have tuh git a divorce now, Marie," Rube Fellows spoke up. "The brute who deserted you is dead."

"Did—did—Bilious——?"

"Mr. Singleton there had to kill him. There was a fight over in Desolation, and——"

"Jeff, did you meet those men?" Mattie broke in anxiously.

"I did, dear, and the whole thing is settled. There'll be no more trouble, but I'm sorry to say that your father—was killed."

"And you—had to kill him?" she asked in a low voice vibrant with agony.

"Indeed not. Your father died like a man. We fought side by side against the outlaws, but they got him. He saved my life."

They were alone, except for Ray.

"Jeff, are you lying to us?" the girl asked steadily.

"Before God I'm not."

"We know that he was a—a rustler himself," she said pitifully.

Jeff could read in her eyes the bitter shame which that belief had placed there, and he knew that it would endure so long as she believed that she was the daughter of a criminal. That stigma, he resolved, should be lifted from her.

No practical good could be accomplished by telling her the whole truth. The rustlers had been beaten. He could now put the Cross Anchor on a paying basis. Why put a lifetime cloud upon the two innocent children, when a little suppression of facts that were no longer of importance would bring them peace?

And Ezra Childs, by the manner of his passing, had earned the right to have his memory respected by his children.

"You got that from Haines, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes. He told Ray all about it."

"He lied to the boy. I've had a talk with Haines, and he admitted having held back the part that would have showed that your father never made a dishonest dollar."

"And didn't he help to brand those—those other managers?" Mattie asked tensely.

"No," he smiled. Nobody had been branded, so why bother to tell that Ezra Childs had had a hand in scaring the men away by a threat of it.

The look of relief on Mattie's face was well worth any concessions he had made to Haines and the crooks of Desolation. He could deal with them again if it ever became necessary, but he doubted if he could ever again bring such a look of happiness into the girl's eyes.

"Jeff," Mattie said presently, "can you ever forgive me for the shameless thing I did when I asked you to give up your work at the ranch and go away?"

"Why, I admired you for the courage of it," he assured her. "But you won't have to do it again.

The next time I'm going to ask you." He glanced pointedly at Ray.

"Aw, rats," said the boy, "if yo're goin' tuh git mushy I'll hunt up Bilious."

He did. But a moment later he was on his way to the bunkhouse. "That pair's worse than the other one," he muttered disgustedly. "An' I thought we'd got two reg'lar men on the ranch at last."

THE END

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